Of roots and fruit

By Bertrand Vaillant

In a new book, Patrick Chastenet examines the anarchist roots of political ecology. He considers five authors who connected the defense of nature to the defense of freedom: Reclus, Ellul, Charbonneau, Illich, and Bookchin. Chastenet offers a rich and instructive presentation that leads to many questions.

Reviewed: Patrick Chastenet, *Les racines libertaires de l'écologie politique* (The Anarchist Roots of Political Ecology), L'échappée, 2023, 240 p., 20 €.

Ecological activists are often accused of resenting personal freedom. Yet the political scientist Patrick Chastenet usefully asks us to consider the anarchist character of political ecology. In his new book, he offers a rich and clear introduction to five activist-thinkers: Élisée Reclus (1830-1905), the nineteenth-century geographer, author, and precursor of nature writing who was involved in the anarchist movement during the Paris Commune; Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) and Bernard Charbonneau (1910-1996), thinkers inspired by Christian personalism who were concerned about modern society's increasingly artificial character; Ivan Illich (1926-2002), an unorthodox Catholic priest who became, in America, a critic of technological and institutional modernity; and, finally, Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), a key figure in the American New Left and a theorist of ecosocialist anarchism.

For Chastenet, these authors, all poorly known and all "anarchists" in their own way, still have much to offer in terms of understanding and resisting the destruction of life. Their critique of techno-industrial society, the dogma of infinite growth, intensive agriculture, the eradication of species, and mass tourism show that they were

possessed of a gift for observation and prediction, as does their critique of superficial and election-oriented environmentalism.

Since the book is intended as a synthesis, I will not attempt to synthesize it. Rather, I propose an interpretation that will emphasize divergences on the very points where Chastenet (for perfectly good reasons) tends to see commonalities. I propose to distinguish more clearly than Chastenet the traditions to which these authors belonged the techno-critics: Ellul, Charbonneau, and Illich; and the socialist anarchists: Reclus and Bookchin.

The techno-critics: Personal autonomy vs. the "technological system"

Each in their own way, Ellul, Charbonneau, and Illich place the critique of technology at the heart of their diagnosis of industrial society. All three lived through the Second World War, the acme of planned technological horror, as well as the modernizing reconstruction of France during the postwar years, which was characterized by industrial planning, land consolidation, intensive agriculture in the countryside, land take, highway construction, and, later, the development of mass tourism and a consumer society. For Illich, a priest from Croatia who went to New York to study, the decisive experiences were his encounter with poor Puerto Rican immigrants in his parish, the profound injustices of American society, and imperialism, which affected even the best-intentioned missionaries in South America. There, Illich spent much of his life, notably in Mexico, teaching Spanish to missionaries but, most importantly, defending the autonomy of local populations and their subsistence practices against the industrial "modernization" being imposed on them. All three were committed thinkers whose intellectual work could never be separated from practical struggles, as Chastenet makes clear by linking their biographies to theoretical presentations of their thought.

Ellul and Charbonneau, as heirs of Montaigne and La Boétie, were inseparable friends, Gascons, and enemies of tyranny and voluntary servitude in any form. Together, they formed a small group of activist-thinkers who were first associated with the journal *Esprit* and the Christian personalism of Emmanuel Mounier. Still closer, they later participated in protests against major industrial projects, from nuclear power plants to genetically modified organisms, by way of large hotel complexes and

the Larzac military base. While they freely described themselves as anarchists and socialists, they rejected Marxism, which they deemed outdated and a danger to individual freedom. The philosophical traditions to which they belonged were personalism and the anti-conformist movement of the 1930s, in addition to Christianity, in the case of the Protestant theologian that was Ellul, and a kind of romantic naturalism, in the cast the agnostic Charbonneau.

Ellul is the thinker of the "technological system." He sees Marx as outdated, as the twentieth century has given rise to a new phenomenon: technology's general and growing ascendency over society as a whole. The result is a "technological society" dominated by the cult of efficiency for its own sake, the rise of technology as an autonomous factor, and corresponding limitations on individual freedom. Ellul shared Charbonneau's rejection of the state, which both saw as the primary instrument for the oppressive planification and organization of society by specialized technocrats. This rejection of planning, viewed as the political counterpart to the mechanization of society, led them to be wary of the very idea of social organization in general and "really existing socialism" and capitalism in particular. Charbonneau's fundamental concept--or, rather, intuition--is the "feeling of nature," the exacerbation of which in modern times is symptomatic of a civilizational crisis that must inspire a revolution against big cities, technocracy, and industrial society, regardless of their political preference. Charbonneau's talent as a writer allowed him to glorify interactions with nature--the freedom of the mountain hiker or rootedness in the "countryside," whether by birth or by choice.

While Chastenet's presentation is clear, highly instructive, and a pleasure to read, it does not address all the questions that might come to a reader. What are we to make of the idea of the autonomy of technology, which is central to Ellul, but is contested by many sociologists of technology?[1] What should one think of theorists who claim to be left anarchists, but who replace the struggle against capitalism with the critique of "Technology" and the "ideology of Progress," conceived as independent processes? Does the use of capital letters (Technology, the State, and so on) and the call for a "civilizational revolution" suggest a theory that has actually identified causes that are deeper than the dynamics inherent in capitalism (and their counterparts in communist societies)? Or is it just a slide into abstract idealism? Is it efficient and without risk to transform the "feeling of nature," as Charbonneau does, into the

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[1] See, for example, Wiebe E. Bijker, who emphasizes the interactions between social and political conditions and technological progress in the emergence and diffusion of technology, in *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs. Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change*, MIT Press, 1997.

rallying cry for revolution, when he himself recognized that this feeling was nothing more than an obscure intuition that could just as easily lead to fascism, state socialism, the Boy Scouts, or anarchism?[2] While Charbonneau took a clear stand against fascism and seems sincere in his passion for freedom, Chastenet is a little quick to dismiss the historian Zeev Sternhell's critique of 1930s non-conformism and its "neither right nor left" ideology, which he believes served as a breeding ground for fascism in France.[3] Without seeing Charbonneau as a romantic fascist, is there not good reason for reflecting on the political effects of this appeal to the feeling of nature and small-scale property? These questions, which are far from rhetorical, deserve consideration.

Illich is perhaps the most stimulating thinker of the four. His critique of industrial society is first and foremost a critique of institutions that is anchored in specific analyses: of schools, hospital, cars, and transportation. In this way, his analysis connects the industrial production of goods to that of services, which are mentioned far less frequently. Thanks to technological tools using rational organization and abundant technology, these institutions reach a first growth threshold when their productivity and efficiency increase, followed by a second one when their size and specialization render them counterproductive. Giant and highly technological hospitals end up causing more suffering, frustration, and sickness; schools select and exclude people from knowledge rather than providing access to it; the generalization of car use slows us down. Moreover, the more such institutions expand, the more they become the private realm of specialists who are considered uniquely able to dispense assistance and knowledge, even as they constantly reduce personal autonomy. Illich's answer is not to reject technology and institutions, but to call for "convivial" tools and organizations, which maximize the autonomy of their users and favors interpersonal relationships, contrary to oppressive tools that turn users into their slaves.

All three are often seen as pessimists and prophets of doom. It is true that they are merciless in their descriptions of the apocalypse that awaits us if industrial society and related social coercion continues to grow. But Chastenet is careful to avoid caricature, distinguishing, for instance, Ellul's critique of the "technological system" from technophobic neo-Luddism. He notes that all three saw themselves as utopians rather than nihilists and acknowledged technology's "ambivalence." The fact remains that, despite Chastenet's enthusiasm (he was close to Ellul), they come across as having little to offer in terms of strategy and solutions to reversing technological trends: in

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[2] For example, "Le sentiment de la nature, force révolutionnaire" (1937), in Jacques Ellul and Bernard Charbonneau, *Nous sommes des révolutionnaires malgré nous,* Seuil (Anthropocène), 2014.

[3] Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche. L'idéologie fasciste en France*, Gallimard (Folio Histoire), 2013.

keeping with their personalism, the flip-side of their concern with the human person vis-à-vis the state and major institutions is Ellul and Charbonneau's call for individual spiritual conversions, conceived as the only hope for bringing about an "ascetic community allowing man to live" (cited 58). This is less true of Illich: an entire dimension of his thought is devoted to a conception of an alternative, convivial society, with its tools, knowledge, and institutions. But even Illich admits that he has no strategy for an off-ramp, even as he harshly criticized environmental activists and, like the two Gascons, any ecological organization that takes for the form of a political party. The detailed description of technology and institution's hold on personal autonomy result in part in the conclusion that individuals are powerless, which, for Ellul, becomes a demand for "non-power'--an idea that, while it might give some meaning (and flair) to the renunciation of imperialism and the domination of nature, is less appealing as a practical activist strategy. Chastenet notes, incidentally, Ellul and Charbonneau's tendency towards elitism and their preference for (very) small groups, as "masses" are always contrasted to individuals.

The socialist anarchists: from the natural sciences to political alternatives

A century separates Élisée Reclus and Murray Bookchin, who respectively open and close Chastenet's book. They both belong to a strand of socialist anarchism rooted in the natural sciences, which emerged in the nineteenth century thanks to the work of Reclus and Kropotkin. A geographer like Reclus, Kropotkin, in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution,* grounds his anarchism in an original conception of nature, which grants a necessary place to cooperation in the "struggle for survival." Reclus came to anarchism after having devoted himself to a scientific description of the earth, as well as to a more literary form of nature writing, as seen in his lovely *The Story of a Stream.* It was on his understanding of the earth's richness that he built his humanist geography and rejection of the conservative ideologies of his time: Social Darwinism, Malthusianism, and the belief in poverty's inevitability. In his work, one finds the premises of an "anthropocentric" ecology that unites utility and beauty. He opposed an industrial modernity that destroys human beings and nature through uprooting, the destruction of landscapes, urban pollution, and the overexploitation of soils. While he gradually aligned himself with the anarchist movement and participated in the Paris Commune, the inherent connection between his work on nature and his

anarchism has been challenged.[4] In his short chapter on Reclus, Chastenet sees these two aspects of Reclus' work as consistent, drawing on a similar humanist aspiration, yet without exactly clarifying their connection.

Murray Bookchin, the son and grandson of Russian communist Jews exiled in New York, had both a Marxist and anarchist heritage, to which he added scientific and anthropological ecologism. Though a critic of the authoritarian Marxism of his time, he nevertheless placed at the heart of his social ecology the struggle against capitalism, which he associated with the other forms of domination that he discovered thanks to the American feminist and antiracist movements. In his work, one finds denunciations of industrial society, pollution, pesticides, the nuclear bomb, as well as a critique of the trend towards gigantism in societies that can only organize themselves by submitting to big corporations and centralized bureaucracies. But the center of gravity of Bookchin's thought is really the emergence of anarchist society rather than the critique of technological and scientific progress: his "municipal anarchism" calls for a better use of every technological and scientific innovation that can be reconciled with radical democracy and ecological sustainability, such as solar and wind panels, and even properly managed nuclear energy, motorized tractors, and so on. In Reclus, Chastenet discerns an excessive technophilic optimism, even if he is careful not to reduce him to this stance. Criticism is legitimate. But might Chastenet make too much of the question of optimism and pessimism as it relates to technological progress, despite the fact that, for Bookchin, this question must be subordinated to that of social equality?

Bookchin's "optimism," which should perhaps be tempered, also reflects his efforts to propose viable social and political alternatives to liberal-authoritarian capitalism that might be more stimulating and fruitful for the contemporary ecological struggle than Ellul's call for spiritual conversion. (Incidentally, it is Bookchin's egalitarianism and strategic pragmatism that inspired Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish autonomist movement Rojava--a concrete anarchist experience that Chastenet hardly mentions). It is also worth emphasizing--as Chastenet does--that Bookchin's optimism also reflects his concern with preserving rationality and science against a mysticism that rejects instrumental reason and even reason itself--whereas Charbonneau, for example, is wary of modern science and its "bourgeois rationalism."

Bookchin also differs from the techno-critics because of his effort to understand nature in terms of a materialist dialectic inspired by the contributions of the

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[4] Philippe Pelletier, *Noir & Vert. Anarchie et écologie, une histoire croisée*, Le Cavalier bleu, 2021.

experimental and social sciences. Ellul, Charbonneau, and Illich elaborated a critique of technology, growth, and the industrial organization of society more than an understanding of nature--or when they did so, like Chabonneau, they quickly encountered the dead-end of great dichotomies--countryside vs. raw nature, necessity vs. freedom, humanity vs. nature--that Bookchin's dialectic just might overcome. In Bookchin's thought, one finds a genuine "philosophy ofnature" that allows him to connect scientific and political ecology.[5] Finally, Reclus and Bookchin's rejection of Neo-Malthusianism, which seeks a drastic reduction in human population and which the other three all endorse, is a further plus, as Chastenet acknowledges. It would be interesting to know more about the root of this position. In any case, the socialists seem more inclined to an optimistic humanism than the personalists.

While Chastenet's criticism of Bookchin are interesting and legitimate, he seems to be harsher on him than on the others. Without seeking to shield Bookchin from criticism, readers might appreciate that objections that come to mind while reading the other portraits be addressed in a similar manner.

Conclusion: of roots and fruit

It is highly necessary, at a time when any consideration of planetary limits are denounced as authoritarian and punitive, to remember that political ecology's great thinkers were also great thinkers of freedom. This book helps bring this fact to light. The preceding remarks in no way alter the fact that Chastenet has written a valuable book and produced a beautiful object, printed with care by L'Échappée editions. It will allow many readers to discover the intellectual trajectories of five major thinkers at a time when political ecology needs a solid theory. Chastenet's knowledge of their work is remarkable, and his main goal, which is to provide an introduction to them and encourage people to read them, has surely been achieved. While we believe that certain underlying differences between these thinkers could be more carefully noted, the comparisons that he makes are justified and eschew easy caricature and simplistic dichotomies. A reflective examination of their thought, limits and the fruits their thought has yielded in the ecological movement could have been taken further so as to give the title its full meaning. While Illich and Bookchin have been and still are

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[5] See, for example, Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology. Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, AK Press, 2022.

essential reference points for theorists and activists of political ecology, do Reclus, Ellul, and Charbonneau really represent its *roots*--and if so, in what sense? Does the French term *libertaire*, even if it is justified, not also make very different conceptions of freedom and anarchism? Having made visible these roots, it might be worth "judging the tree by its fruits," to use the biblical terms of which Chastenet is fond. But this is perhaps asking too much of a single book.

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