

The Christian Origins of the Anthropocene

by Rémi Beau

To understand the Anthropocene, historian Sylvain Piron invites us to explore the Middle Ages. Disconcerting in how it multiplies avenues of research, his book's strength and originality lies in the critical mobilization of the economy of the Scholastics

About: Sylvain Piron, *L'Occupation du monde*, Zones Sensibles, 2018. 140 p., 19 €.

The Anthropocene is the name given to an all too human age. According to anthropologist Philippe Descola, it refers to a radical inversion in the long history of Earth's human habitation. In this view, it is no longer the time to observe the way human societies alter the earth to their advantage. Rather we must try to understand how, in disrupting the great planetary cycles, a particular type of society makes that same earth less and less habitable for humans and a good number of other living species.¹ In his latest work, Sylvain Piron attempts to understand this over-exploitation of the Earth by a portion of humanity through the theme of the occupation of the world.² Key to the book's meaning, the polysemous term of "occupation" contains unto itself the historian's initial hypothesis, that is, the close association of the physical grip that the West holds over the world, with its particular structuring of the

¹ Philippe Descola, "Humain, trop humain ?" *Esprit*, 12, 2015.

² On the distinction between the "habitation" and the "occupatio" of the world, the works of Tim Ingold serve as a useful complement to the book, see particularly *Lines: A Brief History*, Routledge 2007 and *Walking with Dragons*, Bloomsbury, 2013.

field of human experience. This can be characterized by the value placed on *occupatio*, a term indicating a “mental state of one who is no longer free in his or her thoughts (p. 15),” to the detriment of all that is contained in the Roman world’s concept of “*otium*,” or the leisure conducive to intellectual life. In using the term “occupation,” Sylvain Piron introduces the idea that the anthropocenic course is the hallmark of societies that over-occupy individuals to the point that they can no longer sufficiently reflect, absorbed as they are by a “frenetic need for activity (p. 16).” Current economic discourse, in providing the framework for this need as much as it encourages it, would now seem to be the primary medium of this physical and mental stranglehold. The Anthropocene then is the product of a world occupied by “economism,” that is, a world where the economy does not merely embody the dominant discourse of the descriptions of social phenomena, but is also pervasive in individual practices themselves, all while reducing the diversity of motives for human action. It is this dark portrait of human community turned into a “people of merchandise”—as collectively described by Michel Houellebecq, Ivan Illich and Marcel Gauchet (p. 73-96)—that constitutes, in a sense, the opening scene of Sylvain Piron’s book.

How do we understand the historic trajectory that has led us to the Anthropocene? Where can we find the theoretical resources that might allow us to find a way out? These are the two questions the book proposes to answer. To do so, Sylvain Piron, provides an overarching direction to his work. Very generally, the idea is to hold up the Middle Ages as a kind of mirror for the contemporary Western world, so that it might observe itself and develop a more subtle understanding of its own mental representations and practices. His conviction is that this reflected gaze might allow us to see the intersecting roles of Christianity and economic thought in the emergence of the Anthropocene.

The Origins of the Anthropocene: The Central Middle Ages.

For Sylvain Piron, environmental historians generally measure the Anthropocene in historical terms of only two or three centuries, making Western Europe’s industrialization the decisive factor in this sea change towards a system of intensive exploitation of the earth. While he does not deny its “explosive character” (p. 33), the author nevertheless contests the idea that this historical phenomenon marks an absolute break in the history of the West. Instead, he suggests we ponder the cultural origins of this industrial surge. For him, the theory of an absolute break does not hold up against an inquiry into “what rendered both possible and desirable” the transformations of social connections and relationships to nature following the development of industrial capitalism. In fact, behind this “illusion of the modern upturn (p.

42),” intellectual history, in his view, shines a light on a continuity that schematically links the industrial nineteenth century, not only to the scientific sixteenth century, but also—and more deeply—to the theology of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This is why the Anthropocene needs, in fact, a long history:

To take the entire measure of the origins of our ecological crisis, the appropriate chronological unit must encompass the whole of the second millennium of the Christian era (p. 26).

With this, the author harks back to Lynn White, Jr. on the historical roots of the ecological crisis in an article published in 1967.³ While it has been established that the Californian historian’s spotlighting of medieval Christianity’s responsibility in the environmental crisis has not been sufficiently supported, Sylvain Piron maintains that Lynn White had it right concerning the chronology, situating the origins of the crisis in the first centuries of the second Christian millennium. From this perspective, the challenge is to offer more conclusive arguments than those of the American historian, so as to show how

the theological background of medieval culture furnished a powerful encouragement to the intensive exploitation of the natural world, placed at the disposal of human activity (p. 39).

The Role of Christianity

How do we confirm the grip that Christianity has held upon material practices and in particular on productive activities, starting with the beginning of the second millennium? To support this theory, Sylvain Piron begins by gathering classic texts of the humanities and social sciences to his purpose. Above all, it is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that is reexamined. As he does so, the author defends the idea that Max Weber’s working hypothesis concerning the cultural dimension of the emergence of capitalism logically should have led to examining the larger affinities between capitalism and Christianity. But this idea leads him rather towards the work of Marcel Gauchet. In *The Disenchantment of the World*, the French thinker already held that the progressive autonomy of the social body, as prepared by Christianity, happened alongside its constitution into a productive body entirely devoted to a goal of “intensive appropriation of the natural space.”⁴ Brought to its logical conclusion, this thought process of the occupation of the world would lead, in this view, to the subordination

³ Lynn White JR, « The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis », *Science*, 1967, vol. 155, n° 3767, p. 1203–1207.

⁴ At this point Marcel Gauchet refers several times to the notion of “occupation” that Sylvain Piron places at the center of his work (in the original French text *Le Désenchantement du Monde*, p. 115, 117, 119)

of the social body to the now dogmatic imperatives of efficacy and economic productivity. In other words, it leads to a new form of heteronomy.

Still, as Sylvain Piron himself recognizes, this theoretical detour means adopting such a general level that the demonstration “remains by necessity highly schematic.” This is where intellectual history’s input, as announced by the author in his introduction, must be put to the test. He lays it truly out then, beginning a high-speed historical inquiry within the framework, not of the second, but of the first millennium, in order to show how Christianity’s institutional transformations and intellectual re-orientations have pervaded Western societies and contributed to the progressive fashioning of laborious Christian subjects doing their utmost to exploit nature as intensely as possible.

The demonstration is erudite, but glossed over very quickly. Most often, the author allows himself to but briefly indicate points that require a longer elaboration (these will be precisely the subject of a second work by the author). These points are each of Christianity’s “seven bifurcations” that the author sees as pertinent from this perspective: the Pauline inflection towards the West; the conversion of Constantine; Augustinianism; the effect of monasticism; the humanization of Christ in the last centuries of the first millennium; the Gregorian reform; and finally the Franciscan revolution. Two of these bifurcations seem to us imbued with particular importance for the argument in question. The first is the emergence of monasticism. Sylvain Piron interprets ascetic discipline as a way of “controlling the monks’ occupation of time (p. 152).” The author intends to show the long-term effects of this upon whole societies in a later work. The second is the Franciscan revolution. In making the faithful themselves the true judges of their obedience to their vows, rather than leaving that judgment to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, a certain liberty of conscience finds its way in. At the same time, this revolution marks the internalization of the norms of self-control as dictated by monastic discipline. Furthermore, Franciscanism’s importance is increased by the fact that, according to the author, it was within this context that the second step in the shift to the age of the occupation of the world appears, with the birth of economic thought as an intellectual field of growing independence.

The Role of Economic Thought

The second thread that Sylvain Piron would like to spin between the Middle Ages and the present period comes through the linkage between Christian theology and economy. The author contests the idea that economic thought was invented in the eighteenth century and

instead supports the theory of a much earlier emergence with the thirteenth-century publication of the *Treatise of Contracts* by Scholastic thinker Peter of John Olivi.⁵ According to Sylvain Piron, the invention of this economic reflection came about as a practical necessity stemming from the need to manage the rules of financial exchange and commerce developing among the urban middle classes of the Lower Languedoc (p. 161). The originality of Olivi's thought lies in claiming that to do so, there must be a space made for thought that is not strictly theological, but rather an "inferior zone of morality in which divine justice is only slightly implicated (p. 161)." While it may seem paradoxical for a Franciscan intellectual, this position is revealed to be in fact entirely coherent in the *Treatise* as it places relations of exchange in the imperfect domain of human sociality. Thus Olivi contributes to the invention of economy as an autonomous intellectual field by removing judgments about commerce and financial exchange from the direct exercise of divine justice. On this head, the most convincing example that the author has developed is the Franciscan's ideas concerning the determination of the just price in an exchange that must "face both the uncertainty of estimates and the variability of the different circumstances that determine the value of goods (p. 166)." For if this uncertainty is tolerable on a theological level, it is indeed because economic reasoning is indifferent to divine judgment which itself can never be approximate.

But it appears then that the analysis of the economy of the Scholastics gives a new turn to Sylvain Piron's argument, since according to the author, what Peter of John Olivi invents is a modest and non-dogmatic conception of the economy that at this point is a thousand miles away from the dominant, self-assured science that the discipline has become. In other words, the main point of this immersion in Scholastic thought lies not so much in locating therein the early stages of modern economy, as it does in finding the theoretical resources that would allow us to critique it. For, according to Sylvain Piron, if they did invent economy, these "theologians were aware that the exchanges and price determinations are not part of a divine science but rather part of 'matters of opinion' both variable and uncertain, produced in a given time of human history (p. 186)".

In this way Neo-classical contemporary economy would in fact be heir to Scholastic thought, but through a succession of distorting lenses. In the end, this has resulted in a stunning reversal of what the Scholastics' set in motion. From this description of successive reinterpretations of Olivi's reflection on value by the second Scholastic period, then by the Protestant school of natural law and finally by the Scottish Enlightenment—which bears witness moreover to the "remarkable underground fortune" of the text (p. 184)—what Sylvain Piron evokes is the progressive affirmation of economists' pretension to incarnate the divinity's viewpoint from on high. Ultimately, the analysis traces the conversion of the economy, from a

⁵ Sylvain Piron published the French translation in 2012, Pierre de Jean Olivi, *Traité des Contrats*, Belles lettres, 2012, 438p.

“zone of inferior morality” to a form of dogmatic theology. For the author, “the Scholastics’ thought can surely be useful as critique of the political economy (p. 186)” since it invites the discipline to return to a certain modesty of reach.

Conclusion: A Book’s Many Paths

Beyond the mere presentation of his work as an historian, in his book Sylvain Piron makes a general plea for the development of a greater reflectivity within the Western world. From this perspective, he proceeds with a sort of gathering of forces, page by page convoking an impressive list of authors across disciplines. But he addresses this vast corpus in two different ways. The first is in using it to support his initial idea about the medieval origins of the crisis. The second takes a more pluralistic, or rather eclectic, approach, aiming to expose how all the cited works bring to the table, in and of themselves, a greater reflectivity to contemporary societies. The entire book bears the trace of this duality. It alternates between the guiding theme leading to the Middle Ages, as retraced above, and digressions, which often take over the main progression of the argument.⁶ Sylvain Piron fully recognizes this winding structure and indicates several times (p. 20, 39, 127, 188) that this first volume is in fact only a preparatory exploration for a second tome.

If the large space reserved for this erudite eclecticism is explained by the author, it nonetheless presents several problems. First, it accordingly has the effect of weakening the book’s principal hypotheses which surely deserve further elaboration. Furthermore, somewhat paradoxically, the presence of these multiple references introduces rather than resolves a tension between the author’s unabashed pluralist convictions and a strategy of argument giving a considerable importance to one of the paths to explaining the present crisis, which leads to medieval Christianity and the Scholastics. In this sense, mentioning non-Western sources of reflectivity, especially from global and multi-polar history or anthropology, does not really succeed as a counter to the effects of centering that is necessarily produced by the focus on the “Western world’s” historic trajectory and too often fostered by the notion of the Anthropocene.⁷

⁶ On this point, see Bruno Latour’s chronicle about the book, Bruno LATOUR, “Qui a la parole ? A la fois volcan et ornithorynque,” *Le Monde.fr*, 21/06/2018 p.

⁷ On the Euro-centrism typical of certain reflections on the Anthropocene, see the works of Jason W. Moore, particularly *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Verso, 2015 and *Anthropocene or Capitalocene ? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*, PM Press, 2016. To read several suggestions for getting beyond this Euro-centrism see the collective work edited by Rémi Beau and Catherine Larrère, *Penser l’Anthropocène*, Paris, Presses de Science Po, 2018.

Next, on an epistemological level, the book contains two types of reflection that do not work well together. The subtle and precise work of the historian, especially with Olivi's text on one hand, cohabits on the other with extremely general analyses covering centuries in great leaps in one direction or the other between the present day and the Middle Ages. Such writing, while underlining how current medieval thought can be, runs the risk of shoehorning similarities, as when, going back further in time, Sylvain Piron evokes the way in which

A direct line leads from the first monks of the Egyptian desert of the fourth century, busying themselves night and day with plaiting reeds, to the workaholicism of contemporary managers, incapable of logging out of their networks, or to the frenetic need for activities to be offered to tourists and children to occupy their leisure (p. 16).

In conclusion, let us return to the central hypotheses of the work that we have described as spotlighting the respective roles of Christianity and economic discourse at the beginning of the Anthropocene. By the end of the book, it appears that these two hypotheses give a different meaning to the references to medieval thought as a way to understand the present situation. Indeed they seem to be diametrically opposed. Following the path begun by Lynn White, Jr., the first of these hypotheses would seek to identify a form of causal responsibility of Christianity in the ecological crisis. Between the end of the first millennium and the beginning of the second, a particular way of relating to the world, associated with Christian theology and observable in practice, would little by little become the norm. According to this hypothesis, we are facing today the long term consequences of these medieval transformations of society. The second hypothesis, concerning the conversion of the economy into a hegemonic discourse contributing to keep us collectively in the Anthropocene, is itself referred to quite differently in the Middle Ages. The author's concentration on the economy of the Scholastics does not lead him to identify a causal link, but on the contrary to describe a kind of historic counterpoint, a moment in which economy was but one discourse among many, describing a limited portion of human sociality. For Sylvain Piron, Scholastic economists appear as the reverse image of those economists "warming the planet" denounced by Antonin Pottier in a work underlining the performative effects of the economic discourse.⁸ This second avenue seems to us the richest and exposes the more strictly critical aspect of the book. Facing the current economic challenge, it calls us to free up a space for reflecting on what might allow us to escape a certain way of occupying the world, a way which has been reduced to working relentlessly towards the replication of the productive body.

⁸ Antonin Pottier, *Comment les économistes réchauffent la planète*, Paris, Seuil, 2016.