

POLITICAL THEORY

Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas. By Pierre Charbonnier. Translated by Andrew Brown. Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021. 327p. \$74.95 cloth, \$28.95 paper.

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Affluence and Freedom opens with a simple stunning statement “that the transformation of the Earth is now taking place at a pace commensurable with the length of a single life, and even of a simple writing project” (p. 1). Up until humans made the transition to fossil fuels, such increases were so slow and slight that they would have been imperceptible over such a time span had the tools existed to measure them. Pierre Charbonnier sees a specific role for political theorists at this moment and urges them to recognize that “our epistemo-political base has changed more slowly than the world it helped to build” (p. 239). Western industrial societies are stuck in concepts that accelerate environmental catastrophe rather than enable “ecological reflexivity” (p. 239). Political theorists need to effect a “transformation of our political ideas ... of a magnitude at least equal to that of the Geo-ecological transformation [wrought by] climate change” (p. 246).

It is easy to blame capitalism for this deadly acceleration. Charbonnier counters that climate change is not a crisis of nature produced primarily by capitalism, a crisis that calls for humans solely to decarbonize our energy sources; to mitigate the effects of heat, fire, and flooding; and to reduce, recycle, and reuse precious resources. He boldly proclaims that we must do all this and more. The “democratic organization and the aspirations that sustain it ... need to be decarbonized—not just the economy” (p. 10).

That means taking aim at the leading aspiration of modernity, the “project of autonomy,” and charting its “material history” (pp. 10, 4). Far from an abstract ideal, Charbonnier shows that autonomy has always depended on relations to land and people, and that those relations have always been “asymmetric,” underestimating the “very deep and ancient ecological interdependencies” between the agency of humans and that of “soils, plants and animals” (p. 224). Asymmetry was institutionalized through the “liberal pact,” an initially contradictory and ultimately self-defeating relationship between affluence and freedom, which “made intensive, then extensive growth the vehicle of political emancipation” (pp. 58, 262). This pact first emerges in preindustrial modernity with Locke’s “improving citizen” and Smith’s division of labor, two expressions of a “productive schema” that attributes the “gradual improvement in the human lot ... to the intensification of Labor and its productivity,”

improvement that is “independent (or almost) of material or energy input” from outside (pp. 42, 224, 63). The liberal pact naturalized “modern asymmetry” by figuring nature as a constraint on autonomy that humans would master by transferring it onto “others than oneself, human or nonhuman” (pp. 224, 213, 250). In this first version, the liberal pact joined “affluence and freedom, ... growth and democracy” in ways that were not yet wholly self-defeating, although they were contradictory by virtue of being bound up with practices of slavery and wage labor (p. 242).

With the “massive incorporation of fossil fuels,” British, European, and North American economies made a transition from “intensive” to “extensive” growth, a momentous shift that created a “misalignment” between affluence and freedom that has become a chasm today (pp. 73, 75). Extensive growth is extractive; it conditions affluence no longer on the intensification of human labor but on the exploitation of “stocks” that labor can only deplete. It also sets autonomy at odds with growth. Dependency on fossil fuels at once unleashed great wealth and set industrial societies “on a very singular path to a paradoxical servitude to that which released power” (p. 83).

Canonical thinkers such as Grotius, Locke, Smith, Malthus, and Marx linked liberty to affluence by way of asymmetric “forms of occupation of space and land use” and normalized those forms (p. 3). Charbonnier finds astute critiques of affluence and its “paradoxes” in thinkers who are much less likely to make their way onto a history of Western environmental—or political—thought syllabus (80). There is British economist William Stanley Jevons who, already in the nineteenth century, understood the “situation of radical dependence into which England, and more generally industrial civilization, had placed themselves by making fossil resources the key to economic development” (p. 80). Thorstein Veblen, typically known as a theorist of wealth, proves an exceptionally lucid theorist of externalities who understood the in-built tendency of capitalism to produce waste: “[A]s soon as the byproducts of [industrial] activity are considered as being outside of the chain of value—insofar as the cost of their management is not reflected in a firm’s balance sheet—their accumulation can extend over time while going unnoticed” (p. 141). Charbonnier also serves up a Karl Polanyi who originates Charbonnier’s own argument by “invit[ing] us to conceive of [the] link [between nature and politics] as an element *already integral to democratic politics*,” rather than a late-breaking development thrust upon us by the “environmental risks of late industrial civilization” (p. 157; emphasis added). Finally, he represents feminist, anticolonial, and anticapitalist movements as champions for the “symmetrization” of knowledge and politics by the work they have done to restore “woman [sic], the colonized world and nature” to “their role as full-fledged historical actors” (pp. 210–11).

It is exciting to read a book that so insistently demands that Western political thought register the “interdependencies

between modern society and its world, its resources, its environments, and its spaces” (p. 93). This pathbreaking volume meticulously demonstrates that contemporary political thinking cannot “face up to the climate crisis ... not only [because of] capitalism and its excesses; It is also partly *the very meaning of the emancipation of which we are the heirs*, one that was built in the industrial and productionist matrix” (pp. 3, 263; emphasis added). To my mind, the single shortcoming of this ambitious text is that it remains at such a high a level of abstraction that Charbonnier cannot offer glimpses of the new politics of “solidarity between humans and nonhumans” that he repeatedly calls for (pp. 16, 247).

I wondered why Charbonnier chose to conclude this brilliantly insightful critique of modernity with a suspiciously modern challenge: to identify “the collective subject capable of rising up and going in search of its autonomy under the new conditions defined by climate change” (pp. 252–53). To be sure, Charbonnier underscores that no collective heretofore named (“class,” “people,” “nation,” “society”) can answer this call; he also emphasizes that such a subject must locate its “center of gravity at the crossroads of the human and the nonhuman” (p. 257). Yet why remain within the constraints of a subject-centered politics at all when an emergent repertoire of practices has so much to offer by way of new modes of engaging with the Earth?

Charbonnier emphasizes the need to reinvent “urban infrastructures, and the mechanisms that finance them, as well as the social attachments which find their place in them” (pp. 263–64). Why not offer even a brief account of the practices in which governments, nonprofits, and neighborhood activists around the globe are engaged to do just that: by developing denser, more affordable, and more walkable cities; by rewilding marshes and other watersheds; and by breaking the waste cycle of capitalism through sharing, swapping, repairing, and otherwise reducing consumption (p. 263)? This work is all happening now at what Mihnea Tanasescu, in his 2022 book *Ecocene Politics*, calls the “specific scale at which things matter” (p. 17). By dwelling eloquently and urgently at the scale where concepts matter, *Affluence and Freedom* effects a powerful reframing of Western political thought that reveals human–nonhuman relations to be central to each of its canonical works regardless of whether they thematize environmentalism or not.

The Currency of Politics: The Political Theory of Money from Aristotle to Keynes. By Stefan Eich. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. 320p. \$35.00 cloth.
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Stefan Eich’s *The Currency of Politics* is an especially timely book. The return of serious inflation across the global economy means the work will garner even more attention

than it rightly would have anyway. For there is a great deal to admire here—even if what we are given is really two books rather than one.

The first book offers a history of the political thought of money. And it is a very good book indeed. Eich’s project is to reconstruct decisive moments in the history of political theorizing about money by examining the contributions of some of the most powerful thinkers on this topic, who were prompted by contemporaneous money crises themselves. The cast of characters is initially surprising and, at first glance, disparate: Aristotle, Locke, Fichte, Marx, Keynes. But their selection is well justified, both in Eich’s proffered rationale and in his execution. Namely, that these thinkers both exemplify different breakthroughs in how to think about what money is, as well as what it can do for us (both good and bad), but in turn that they offer a way of tracing the intellectual history of money back through constituent crises that helped forge what money has indeed come to be and mean. Using variously the analogy of a geologist digging down through layers of sedimented deposits, or the space explorer traveling through wormholes to leap between major historical episodes, Eich takes us on a fascinating journey.

Along the way one learns a great deal. First, about how Aristotle conceived of money as both a social cement for disparate agents in anonymous large-scale city-states and as a potential site of political turmoil given the inherent opportunities for wealth accumulation and inequality that the possession of currency presented. Then in a particularly brilliant chapter about Locke’s direct personal engagement in the late-seventeenth-century English recoinage crisis, Eich shows how this led Lock to advance the almost paradoxical position that the sovereign state must assert the independent and immutable base value of the currency as tied to a specific quantity of silver, itself an inherent act of political fiat that nonetheless proceeded as if the value of money were naturally given and beyond politics. (Central for Locke was that doing so enabled the restoration and maintenance of trust between ruled and rulers; the 2,000-year leap from Aristotle is thus not as jarring as one would expect.) Fichte would go a step further and suggest the necessity of pure fiat money as part of the creation of a closed commercial state, and Eich reminds us that for a brief interlude between 1797 and 1815 the British did in fact operate a fiat system before returning to a gold standard that would become central to global currency operations for another hundred years. In the mid-nineteenth century, Marx would develop a complex view of money as capital, and Eich shows that he was by no means a simplistic commodity theorist of money, as has previously been thought, whilst also explaining why money is so mysteriously absent from volume 1 of *Das Kapital* (despite it having extensively preoccupied Marx in the previous decades). Finally, John Maynard Keynes’s