

The general interest of humanity

by Stéphanie Roza

What if the impending ecological crisis required a recommitment to republicanism? This is Serge Audier's thesis: we must not respond to environmental challenges with an anti-modern or anti-statist reflex, but with a new conception of the general interest.

Reviewed: Serge Audier, *La cité écologique. Pour un éco-républicanisme* [The Ecological City: For an Eco-Republicanism], La Découverte, 2020, 752 p., 28 €.

With this third opus, Serge Audier concludes his monumental trilogy, devoted, as he puts it, to "a complex and dialectical analysis of the intellectual bases of the ecological crisis," as well as the "resistance, breaches, and alternatives" it generates (p. 652). The first book, *La société écologique et ses ennemis* [Ecological Society and its Enemies] (2017) sought to demonstrate that ecological consciousness, far from being alien to the socialist and republican traditions, was already implicit in some of the authors belonging to these schools of thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second book, *L'âge productiviste* [The Productivist Age] (2019), considers two centuries of environmental policies which, in many world regions, have proved incapable of renouncing the productivist logic that has ravaged our natural environment. Audier's new book has a more programmatic goal: it takes on the difficult question of the philosophical, economic, and political conditions of possibility of a new form of social organization that would take full measure of the ecological crisis and provide a way to avoid an ecocidal catastrophe while also allowing present and future generations to flourish.

Modernity and the ecological challenge

Consistent with the first volume's argument, Audier maintains, in his new book, that the ecological alternative, far from entailing a radical rupture with the categories and values bequeathed by modernity, can and must draw sustenance from them. Its entire argument seeks to demonstrate the theoretical and political resources that the long history of republicanism, socialism, and even liberalism can offer to developing a vision of human society that is simultaneously harmonious and more respectful of the natural environment. He does not try to hide the ways in which the serious contemporary crisis and the threat it poses to our species' survival are deeply rooted in modernity itself. Indeed, the project's challenge lies in the need for a "conceptual and programmatic renewal" (p. 28) that acknowledges modernity's impasses, yet without renouncing the promise harbored by certain intellectual trends extending back to the Italian Renaissance (though Audier also revisits, on particular points, the lessons of the Ancients, from Aristotle to Cicero). Despite its ambiguities and misguided ways, modernity's legacy cannot be avoided, since it is to this heritage that we owe the promise of emancipation, universalism, and democracy.

The eco-republican path that Audier's work traces is thus opposed to the unilaterally anti-modern, anti-statist, and anti-progressive reaction of many contemporary ecological currents. Against such views, Audier maintains that the ecological crisis makes a republican revival more important than ever, since republicanism throws a stark light on the collective character of our individual interests. The ecological crisis, by threatening our species' survival, brings the question of the general interest back to the center of public debate, perhaps more than any crisis in human history. This crisis reintegrates the general interest into an even greater framework, recalling the fundamental interdependence of humanity and the surrounding natural world: it reveals, in this way, the hitherto largely unsuspected duties of human beings towards non-human forms of life on earth, duties that can only be addressed at the collective level –in short, through politics. Furthermore, by mortgaging the future, the ecological crisis reminds us, in the negative, that we belong to the sequence of generations. It brings us back to our generic nature. It does so in another way as well: through our duties to those who come after us, in a more or less distant future. Finally, because the current catastrophe does not affect all the earth's inhabitants in the same way, depending on their place in the social hierarchy, country of residence, gender, skin color, and so on, it requires consideration of these inequalities and the quest for an equitable solution.

Far from relegating the social question to the background and declaring older cleavages outdated, the current situation and its stakes should incite us to recommit to the left's traditional characteristics even if, of course, the basic coordinates of this problem have been scrambled. Audier concludes: "after the social republic, we must now invent the eco-social republic" (p. 62). Thus, his point is less to wipe clean the theoretical and strategic slate of the past than to encourage a leap in civic consciousness and drum up collective thinking and mobilization.

The parameters of an eco-republican society

The entire first part of the book is devoted to examining the theoretical conditions for reconciling ecology and republicanism and the implications of such a synthesis for a new conception of the individual. Its goal is, on the one hand, to determine the parameters of an "ecological humanism arising from a republican and socialist matrix" (p. 186) that is free of anthropocentrism's shortcomings (chapter 2), and, on the other, to reconceive human freedom and dignity without falling prey to a destructive individualism (chapter 3). On the latter point, Audier pleads for an unprecedented articulation of "negative" freedom, as advocated by the liberal tradition, and the "positive" freedom embraced by republicans, who see deep involvement by citizens in civic affairs as the template of human achievement. Audier hopes that ecological catastrophe will make it widely apparent that individuals are dependent on the considered and collective management of "the generation, preservation, and transmission of shared resources" (p. 241). Thus life itself makes it imperative to integrate the individual pursuit of happiness and a more comprehensive approach to the good life, comprising a robust social and participatory dimension.

These considerations lead to part two, which is devoted to tracing the parameters of an "ecological community": its mores (chapter 4), economy (chapters 5 and 6), and political institutions (chapters 7 and 8). It is not possible to enumerate, even succinctly, every proposal presented in these pages, which reflect a desire to address nearly every major social problem. Still, it is worth noting Audier's three major sources of inspiration, which shape the spirit of his proposals: first, egalitarian republicanism, notably that of Machiavelli and Rousseau, which is helpful for conceptualizing a society of citizens endowed with equal rights and duties; second, the "civil economy" of Italian republican economists, who have extensively examined the need for reciprocity and care for others on the part of all citizens, including in commercial

exchange; and, last but not least, the social economy of French solidarist thinkers, who, "by insisting on society's generalized complexity and interdependence, open the door to broader responsibility for everyone and to possibilities for transforming property structures in ways that can grapple with the challenge of solidarity and interdependence" (p. 403). These theoretical foundations allow Audier to endow his concrete proposals with a degree of anthropological, philosophical, and political depth, as when he encourages the development of producer and consumer cooperatives, legal caps on property rights, redistributive taxation, inheritance reform, planning, and so on.

Eco-republican politics: what strategies?

Far from imagining an irenic and consensus-based transformation of predatory and ecocidal capitalism into an eco-republic concerned with general wellbeing, Audier is conscious that such change depends necessarily (and unavoidably) on social conflict, which takes the form, in part, of class struggle, of the kind once emphasized by the socialist tradition. Yet he displays a preference for non-violent forms of civil disobedience, rooted in rising consciousness of the general interest of humanity and its non-human environment. In this way, he wagers optimistically on an extraordinary burst of collective lucidity, bolstered by considerable strategic intelligence. To be sure, readers are more likely to benefit from such optimism than from a new collapsological variation on the theme of generalized breakdown. Too many books and articles have appeared recently predicting a cataclysm that is imminent or already underway, yet without proposing serious solutions to avoiding it or at least mitigating its consequences; they tend to offer no individual or collective answer other than anguished denunciation, impotent resentment towards those responsible for the catastrophe, or the cynical indifference of those who know the battle has already been lost.

Even so, one wonders if it is reasonable or sufficient to count on heightened human awareness--or even an awareness of the majority --of these fundamental collective interests. It is far from certain that the exceptional politicization required for an eco-republican movement could result directly from fears about the planet's future, which, structurally, remains the prerogative of social groups whose basic needs have largely been met. Consequently, it seems necessary to come up with a strategy that would begin by mobilizing the most numerous classes of the world's population

around their most immediate problems (subsistence, health, housing, and stable employment) and to renew their faith in their collective ability to improve their own and their children's lot before trying to make the connection –which, intellectually speaking, is irrefutable– between these problems and the need for an ecological revolution at the global level. This standpoint leaves open the question of the political and organizational means required to pursue such a strategy. What role can be played by existing organizations (parties, unions, and various movements)? Should they be avoided, replaced, or merged into new structures? What might be the parameters and operating rules of such structures? These are admittedly forbidding questions, necessitating, no doubt, vast collective reflection.

The book's conclusion allows for a –presumably provisional– assessment of modernity's legacy to subsequent generations, who face one of human history's greatest challenges. Audier rightly emphasizes the need to uncouple two aspects of this legacy, which long seemed inseparable: on the one hand, humanity's project of emancipating itself through autonomy; on the other, that of an absolute mastery of nature within and without us. It has now become necessary to abandon the fantasy of a final victory over untamed nature and to conceptualize, rather, the "autonomous interdependence" between human beings and between human beings and the environment. The recognition of this twofold interdependence should dispose us less to the rejection of technology and science than to their reorientation, as they are subordinated to the project of an *autonomous society* in the broadest sense of the term.

From this perspective, it must be acknowledged that heteronomy is unsurpassable, as is conflict, which the modern emancipatory project never eliminated. These insights would seem to be the necessary conditions for keeping alive hope in progress –with progress no longer conceived as the triumphal march of humanity forging a world after its own image, but as a never-ending collective effort that also –and perhaps most importantly– requires better moral living. It is perhaps on this basis, Audier suggests, that one can hope to prolong, at new costs, the struggle for liberty, equality, and fraternity, "which have always been the essence of socialism and the left, properly understood" (p. 636). We happily grant him this point.

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