

# Is There an End to Productivism?

About: Serge Audier, *L'Âge productiviste, hégémonie prométhéenne, brèches et alternatives écologiques*, La Découverte

by Jean Bérard

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**The most influential doctrines (Liberal, Socialist, Marxist) that have competed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century to define the future of industrial society are all built for a productivist society. This hegemony has marginalised the ecological alternatives. Is their dominance coming to an end?**

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Serge Audier's book is impressive for its size (820 pages) and erudition (125 pages of notes), all the more so because it completes a two volume series begun with *La Société écologique et ses ennemis*, published in 2017.<sup>1</sup> The series constitutes a dense encyclopaedia of the debates on ecology since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inviting the reader to approach authors we thought we knew from this angle, and to rediscover forgotten thinking and controversies that are difficult to summarise given the scale of the work.

The book opens with a reminder of the now well-known features of the destruction and threats produced by the functioning of industrial capitalism—global warming, extinction of species, soil degradation, air pollution and pollution of the oceans. It follows two highly structuring paths for environmental history.<sup>2</sup> To start with, it carries out a rereading of the development of industrial capital, viewed from the perspective of the effects the transformation of the modes of production have had on nature, with the use of fossil fuels, chemistry and machines.<sup>3</sup> Then it refutes the idea that contemporary societies advanced through the

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<sup>1</sup> Serge Audier, *La Société écologique et ses ennemis. Pour une histoire alternative de l'émancipation*, Paris, La Découverte, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, Frédéric Graber, Fabien Locher, Grégory Quenet, *Introduction à l'histoire environnementale*, La Découverte, Repères, 2014; Christophe Bonneuil, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, transl. David Fernbach, Verso, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Verso, 2016.

destruction of nature specific to industrial economies, without asking too many questions until the 1960s-1970s, the time that supposedly marked the beginning of 'reflexive modernization'.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, warnings regarding the effects of industrial capitalism on nature are as old as it is, and it only developed after overcoming ancient resistances and regulations that protected populations against the harmful effects of productive activities.<sup>5</sup> Every transformation of the modes of production has seen its share of fears regarding the destruction of nature and the dangers for human beings. While these were long dismissed as anxieties formulated by those who were slow to accept progress, today these warnings seem to be visionary and we are less concerned with the disease that provoked them than with what prevented us from listening.<sup>6</sup>

As far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic, the geographer Franz Schrader (1844-1924) expressed his alarm at how human activity was 'erasing the slow accumulation of vegetal wealth produced by the million year old collaboration between the atmosphere and the earthly sphere'. In his analysis, he connected 'military and industrial destruction' and the destruction of peoples deemed inferior' (p. 15). Why, asks Audier, have we forgotten his thinking, like that of so many others? To understand this, the concept of productivism is a key tool to grasp what connects theoretical and political positions that were long perceived primarily in terms of their opposition. 'Despite its lack of ideological precision, understood as an unending quest for maximum production, it [productivism] is not only a symptom, it in fact helps us decipher an essential dimension of industrialism that was and is indissociable, not just from capitalism, but also from the very history of Communism, Socialism, and a large section of the Left' (p. 78).

*L'Âge productiviste* is structured around an 'intellectual history' (p. 12) and the project, explicated in the epilogue, of developing a new left wing political thinking, extended to include ecological issues. But this history is not disembodied. On the contrary, Serge Audier constantly attempts to understand how political concepts respond to specific conjunctures. He specifically seeks to identify critical moments when the crises of the capitalist economy, or the consequences of the industrialisation of warfare, have led to a questioning of the productivist functioning of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, transl. Mark Ritter, SAGE Publications, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> François Jarrige and Thomas Le Roux, *La contamination du monde. Une histoire des pollutions à l'âge industriel*, Le Seuil, Sciences humaines, L'univers historique, 2017; Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, 'Circonvenir les *circumfusa*. La chimie, l'hygiénisme et la libéralisation des «choses environnantes»: France, 1750-1850 », *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, 2009/4 (n° 56-4), p. 39-76.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'apocalypse joyeuse. Une histoire du risque technologique*, collection L'Univers historique, Le Seuil, 2012 ; François Jarrige, *Techno-critiques. Du refus des machines à la contestation des technosciences*, La Découverte, 2014.

## The Hegemony of Productivism

The first moment studied is the constitution of the hegemony of productivism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a time of tension between a defence of industrialisation and an attempt to preserve nature. But these conflicts were ‘resolved in the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in favour of the industrial world, against a backdrop of a widespread cult to industrial and scientific progress as the condition for abundance and social progress for everyone’. (p. 46). Serge Audier analyses the ‘technophile enthusiasm that inspired a section of the elite of the time’ (p. 91). He also underscores Saint-Simons influence, with his promotion of a society organised around an elite of engineers, considered the leaders of progress, and an ‘active philosophy’ of conquering the world’ (p. 106). This vision is echoed, for example, in Cabet’s technophile and democratic Communism that was awaiting ‘the liberation of the proletarians by the machine’ (p. 110).

While alternative projects for ecological societies—studied in the author’s previous work, structured around the desire to reconcile production and the protection of nature, reconsider working hours, the shape of cities, the relationship with animals or even children’s education—did exist, they were only ‘a tiny minority’ (p. 120). In France, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Saint Simonian ideology was embodied by the great scientific figures of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic like Marcellin Berthelot. The latter believed that ‘chemistry, developing the audacity of its discoveries in an incomparable manner, today claims to produce food and replace the agricultural industries, which are all based on the production of living animal and vegetal beings, by creating nutritive matter out of nothing.’ (p. 131).

And between the social utopias and the end of the century, Marx and Engels formulated a critique of industrial capitalism. The relationships the two authors of the *Communist Manifesto* had with ecology are controversial.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, what led Marx to pay attention to nature was his materialism. This oriented his interest in the processes at work in modern agriculture, and his concern at the desire to create short-term profit that would, in the long term degrade the soil. But this was not sufficient to make Marxism a pre-ecological movement. The historical role the capitalist bourgeoisie played in the coming of a new world is clearly that of class domination, but it permitted completely unexpected achievements, set out in the Communist Manifesto, to exist: ‘Subjection of Nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?’ Against the continuation of earlier forms of domination, Marx and Engels considered that industrial and bourgeois capitalism was a fate to be traversed and not deconstructed.

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<sup>7</sup> John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology, Materialism and Nature*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2000. For a critical discussion see, for example Pierre Charbonnier, ‘De l’écologie à l’écologisme de Marx’, *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, 22, 2012.

The productivist dimension of Marxism was reinforced and cemented over the course of re-readings by the socialist leaders, particularly those of the powerful Social Democratic Party of Germany. Connecting with themes dear to Auguste Blanqui, Louise Michel and Élisée Reclus, in 1917, Rosa Luxemburg wrote from her prison cell that she had learnt of the ‘disappearance of song birds in Germany’ and was distressed at the ‘stealthy and inexorable destruction of these defenceless little creatures’. She felt their fate was similar to the ‘dying-out of the Redskins in North America... gradually driven from their hunting grounds by civilised men’. But this was a ‘residual orientation’ in German socialism (p. 192). In France, Jules Guesde and Jean Jaurès shared a belief in the ‘necessary and beneficial progress of industrial automation in the capitalist era’ (p. 202), and in Russia, G. Plekhanov’s Introduction to Marxism, led to a purge of the anarchist legacy and the populist desire to avoid a Western style trajectory of modernisation (p. 211).

## **Filling the Breaches**

The First World War and the Russian Revolution nonetheless created breaches in the hegemony of productivism. Contesting the idea that essentially links the ecological concern of the 1920s and 1930s with Nazism, and in an attempt to discredit it, Serge Audier identifies several pivots of concern for nature.

One of these was the international gatherings for the protection of nature, like the Berne International Conference for the Protection of Nature held in 1913. The participants were sensitive to natural beauty that was threatened by industry, and the wastage of resources (the use of whale oil to make soap, for example), but their desire to protect nature was not related to a critique of industrial capitalism. On this occasion the author identifies a ‘paradox’ with far reaching consequences: ‘the most virulent critiques of capitalism—excluding some anarchist and other original views— were generally blind to the environmental debates, while the most lucid protectors of nature (...) demonstrated a complete inability to understand, and moreover examine the destructive logic of capitalism’ (p. 219). The early years after the Russian Revolution seemed to be marked by a temporary compromise between Russian environmentalism and the Bolshevik regime, embodied specifically in a policy for national parks and the relative independence scholars enjoyed. But this experience was short lived and rapidly came to be dominated by the productivist imperative (p. 273) that focused on the electrification defended by Trotsky (‘man in Socialist society will command nature in its entirety’), the valorisation of the engineer, and the desire to follow the path of American Taylorist modernisation.

Serge Audier does not conceal the fact that a number of trends of thought concerned with the destructive effects of capitalism are rooted in the conservative theories of the 1930s (René Guénon, Julius Evola), with nature representing an alternative to modernity as it was

exemplified in the cursed large cosmopolitan city. On the Left, it took a long time to vanquish the repulsion for any kind of positive view of the connection between man and the earth. Nonetheless, a few rare anti-productivist centres persisted, particularly around small libertarian circles (p. 369). But they carried little weight to counter the rise of the productivist and planning theories that were formulated in the Inter-War period, and revealed their full impact after 1945.

## **Triumphs and Disasters of Industrial Power**

The Second World War is largely analysed as an accelerator of the effects of human production on nature.<sup>8</sup> This is true both of Western style capitalism, but also of the USSR and Communist China. Just after the war, economic growth was the priority. Maurice Thorez explained to the workers: ‘produce, produce, and produce more. To produce and make coal is the highest form of your duty as Frenchmen’ (p. 458), while before the UN, Andreï Vychinski explained: ‘we will use atomic energy to raze mountains, deviate the course of rivers, irrigate the deserts. We will use atomic energy to take life to places where man has only seen desolation’ (p. 461). The environmental disasters that occurred under Chinese Communism were also huge, following the Maoist command: ‘Make the tall mountain bend its head’ (p. 478). The paradox of these years is that the nuclear power that nourished these dreams was also used at the end of the war, triggering new fears regarding the destruction of the Earth. But the voices that expressed these concerns (Jacques Ellul et Bernard Charbonneau, Gunthers Anders, Aldous Huxley) remained an isolated minority.

The situation changed with the waves of protests in the 1960s, triggered in the United States partly by the criticism of the connections between industry and the army (p. 525). New theories linking the critique of capitalism to that of consumer society (Henri Lefèvre, Herbert Marcuse) were developed in a search for new paths to socialism (André Gorz), and reconnected with the libertarian tradition, to envisage an antiauthoritarian ecological policy (Ivan Illich, Murray Bookchin). This thinking resituated the critique of productivism in the field of Left wing thinking, ‘decontaminating’ the ecological legacy after its compromises in the 1930s.

The specificity of the 1970s was a growing concern among a section of the industrial elite. This is confirmed by the famous Club of Rome Report on *The Limits to growth*, published in 1972. But the crucial point is the way it was received. In France, it was criticised both by the PCF and Raymond Barre (p. 619). Among the Communists, it revealed the difficulty in carrying out an ecological shift on the Left. There were attempts made by the Italian Communist Party (p. 653), or in France, by the United Socialist Party, but in short, the PS went (almost) directly from the Common Programme to support for neo-liberalism (p. 662). Serge Audier analyses the failure of the ecologist movements and other movements of the 1970s

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<sup>8</sup> Christophe Bonneuil, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, transl. David Fernbach, Verso, 2016.

from this perspective, to formulate ‘a more general strategy of political transformation [that] sometimes mortally weakened the causes they were defending’ (p. 687).

The Alter-globalist (Altermondialiste) reminder in the 2000s attempted to ‘hold together what had often been dissociated in the social struggles and political movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: more direct and semi-direct democracy, a culture of fundamental political and social rights, as well as a concern with ecology that had shifted to the forefront’ (p. 703). The book demonstrates the pertinence of theoretical reformulations around common goods. However, the author remains worried of the power relationship between local experiments based on this principle and the functioning of the most aggressive forms of capitalism, although the two could cohabit in countries ‘following massive extra-activist rationales under often corrupt and authoritarian governments’ (p. 713).

## **The Neo-liberal Offensive and its Enemies**

In reality, since the 1970s, the power relationship has been shaped by a twofold neo-liberal attack: both against the regulatory and planned State that emerged after 1945, and against the potentially dissenting effects of ecology. Serge Audier shows that neoliberalism is not a single trend and that, among the early theorists of the 1930s, some like Wilhelm Röpke supported the ‘critique of the environmental destruction of the world’. He nonetheless shows that the version of neoliberalism that triumphed from the 1970s and 1980s onwards created a war machine against ecology. Hayek and the Société du Mont-Pèlerin took up cudgels against the Club of Rome report, repudiating any kind of regulation of production, and the warnings of the polluting effects of chemical products—thereby joining hands with the merchants of doubt who, in the case of the tobacco industry, have been the object of a serious study. In this endeavour, they joined hands with the merchants of doubt. These pages help us grasp how the economic system dominant today is not only slow to evaluate the need for ecological regulations but was explicitly designed to fight them.

Hence we need to lay the foundations for a political philosophy for the present, to combat this hegemonic thinking. With this aim, the epilogue states its support for republican thinking, freed of its nationalist heritage, extended to include social and environmental issues, and in clear conflict with productivist capitalism.

## **Producing and Contesting Hegemony**

The book provides important historical tools to elucidate the difficulties in constituting ecology using the benchmarks of the political field. On the Left, the protection of nature was

envisaged by traditions that have remained in the minority since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it was also developed both by conservatives who were virulent enemies of modernity, and by people belonging to the bourgeoisie who wanted to preserve spaces for leisure, without reversing the productive rationales that created their wealth.<sup>9</sup> Audier opens up fertile pathways that shed light upon the contemporary divisions within political ecology, located between a critique of capitalism and reconciling nature with liberal and /or conservative political options.

We nonetheless regret that the book does not really address the meaning of the notions of hegemony and breaches mentioned in the title. How do we connect the power relationships in the intellectual field with the wider functioning of political and economic power? The introduction reveals this difficulty. On the one hand, Serge Audier considers that ‘the response to the question of who the enemies of ‘ecological society’ are, is clear: capitalism and those who control it’ (p. 21). On the other hand, he rightly states that a study of those in control cannot exist without looking at intellectual history, alongside works dedicated to ‘economic and social transformations, scientific and technological revolutions, the progress of organisations, transformations in the law, or even concrete militant practices’ (p. 82).

Thus, without quite resolving it, the work raises the problem of how the material and symbolic dimensions of the hegemony of productivism fit together. How are the relations between intellectual production, the States, businesses, trade unions, etc. organised? Are different configurations at work, particularly between the moments when the hegemony of productivism seems all pervasive, and the times when breaches are created? The question is of historical interest, and with the help of contributions from environmental history, it allows us to better understand how productivism became predominant in opposition to its theoretical critiques, as well as to the social forces that attempted to counter it. But, most of all, maybe it enhances our understanding of the present. What is the situation in terms of the breaches in the domination of productivism? At a time when there are ecological crises everywhere, and no political decisions are taken to remedy them anywhere, we need to draw the dividing lines between a defence of productivism in its somewhat tarnished finery, and the search for alternatives consistent with the scientific data on the climate, biodiversity, etc. It is also useful to approach the connections between different fields where such positions are held, to understand their convergences and discords, and the power relationships, for example, between the increasingly alarming nature of the consensus in the scientific field, and the relative inertia in the field of power.

Here, we recognize the terms of Bourdieu’s sociology, although Serge Audier briefly differentiates himself from the sociologist in the introduction. The analysis of capital that permits people to exercise power in distinct fields, and the hierarchisation of these fields, seem to us to contribute to an understanding of the coexistence of the domination of productivism and the multiplication of the challenges it has to face. What allows the hegemony of

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<sup>9</sup> William Cronon, ‘The trouble with wilderness; or, getting back to the wrong nature’, in W. Cronon (dir.), *Uncommon ground. Rethinking the human place in nature*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1995, pp. 69-90.

productivism to persist? What are its intellectual justifications? As we have seen, it is true that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, industrial capitalism has coexisted with those who denounce the destruction it creates. And even today, after the climate-sceptics, we have the optimistic liberals who believe the market and technical progress will help avoid disasters. But are we not heading for a rapid collapse of everything in the field of ideas that could reassure us that we can continue to constantly produce more, and correlatively, an increasingly overt demonstration of the continuation of the current state of the economy, solely in the names of State power and the profitability of capital? Economists speak of ‘zombie ideas’<sup>10</sup> to designate concepts that remain dominant in public debate although their intellectual value has long been invalidated. Does this not imply that we are living in the realm of ideas, with a phantom productivism, whose ascendancy better indicates the marginalisation of the power of the intellectual field itself, rather than the persistence of the hegemony of productivism in this area? From this perspective, we can understand that the first demand of a young ecologist movement like *Extinction Rebellion* is merely that the information propagated by the medias and governments should begin to tell the truth about the destruction of nature.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sébastien Charles, Thomas Dallery and Jonathan Marie, ‘Institutions internationales et idées zombies en économie: enfin la rupture ?’, *Mediapart*, 11 April 2016.

<sup>11</sup> <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/demands/>