

Büscher, Bram and Robert Fletcher. 2020. *The Conservation Revolution: radical ideas for saving nature beyond the Anthropocene*. New York: Verso. Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-771-5. 24.95 USD, 216 pages.

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Conservation, as we all know, can do better at slowing ecological catastrophe, let alone stopping it. Yet it remains one of the most important concepts in terms of environmental policy, and climate change mitigation. The overall failures of conservation, especially as it relates to the lesser-known issues (e.g. a tendency to be associated with militarization, mass displacement, ecotourism for the wealthy, and collaboration with extractive industries), emerge as the central point of intervention in *The conservation revolution: radical ideas for saving nature beyond the Anthropocene*.

Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher are both professors in The Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University, The Netherlands, and are well-known political ecologists and extensively published critics in the field of conservation. Büscher has previously published the book *Transforming the frontier: Peace Parks and the politics of neoliberal conservation in Southern Africa* (2013) and Fletcher *Romancing the wild: cultural dimensions of ecotourism* (2014), while both have edited a series of books, among them *Nature™ Inc: environmental conservation in the neoliberal age* co-edited with Wolf Dressler (2014). *The conservation revolution* contains eight chapters, including the introduction, "Intermezzo" and conclusion. The book introduces and argues for a particular concept,

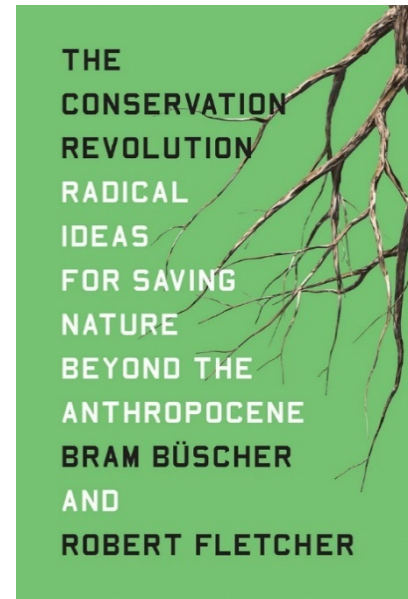
"convivial conservation" as a revolutionary and "scientifically grounded, political platform and paradigm" that will "help make political choices clear in this particular moment of time" (p. 12).

The introduction begins by briefly situating readers within the conservation research debates. The authors identify four heuristically useful positions within conservation: "Mainstream Conservation," "Neoprotectionism," "New Conservation" and, the position advocated in the book, "Convivial Conservation." Framed around the Anthropocene concept—but preferring the term "Capitalocene"—the authors announce that their central target is the nature-culture dichotomy and capitalism itself.

The book begins by reviewing conservation. It acknowledges the colonial legacy of conservation and its articulation as "fortress conservation", community-based conservation (CBC) and market-based conservation—or "fortress, flexible and fictitious conservation" (p. 23). The authors contend that these conservation regimes—and corresponding Mainstream, Neoprotectionism and New Conservation positionalities—fail to challenge capitalism adequately and suffer the socio-ecological separation of "the human nature dichotomy."

Dissecting scientific inquiry, Büscher and Fletcher recognize that science and theory always have politics embedded in them, "which means that it must always be open" for debate (p. 50). The authors discuss the "wilderness," "rewilding", "self-willed nature" and the "metabolic rift" in relation to the nature culture-dichotomy, locating the origins of the latter in the 15th century (as noted in Caroline Merchant's *Death of nature*) and also with the 17th Century English Game Laws that created a "new vision of nature" (see the work of Michael Perelman) (p. 73). Büscher and Fletcher demonstrate how conservationists "often simultaneously reinforce a sense of separation from nature" (p. 55)—excluding or viewing humans as an inherently destructive force. Their argument, however, is about how "conservation and capitalism have intrinsically co-produced each other, and hence the nature-culture dichotomy is foundational to both" (p. 72).

After establishing human separation from nature as a central problem, Chapter 3 turns to interrogate capitalism. The chapter is framed by criticizing the various conservation camps as either sidestepping the need



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to (adequately) confront capitalism, or flat-out promoting its logic in conservation through the use of market mechanisms. The section then reviews Marxian and Eco-Marxian theory with James O'Connor's "Second Contradiction", Harvey's "Uneven geographical development", Jason Moore's work, and various other authors with the conservation literature, before presenting their own synthesis of "accumulation by conservation" (p. 105), which contends that conservation itself is a capital accumulation strategy. Natural Capital, Offsetting and the financialization of nature emerge as its central concerns.

Placing "Mainstream Conservation", "Neoprotectionism" and "New Conservation" into dialogue with each other, Chapter 4 evaluates these three conservation paradigms. The authors find points of rejection, but more so affinities within these conservation paradigms in relation to their "Convivial Conservation." The notion of the "Great Acceleration" and the "Anthropocene"—as the two are intertwined—are also critically assessed in favor of the terms Capitalocene and Chthulucene, even if the latter is not without criticism. "Four key statements" of convivial conservation are synthesized based on the discussions in previous chapters: "Reality is Constructed, but this does not mean that 'everything is relative'; "'Nature' and 'society' are Dialectically Integrated"; "Conservation is an element within a broader process of 'uneven geographical development'; and "Value matters." (pp. 128-146; see also Büscher and Fletcher 2019).

Before moving to Chapter 5, which elaborates on the notion of Convivial Conservation, the reader is confronted by an *Intermezzo* that situates Convivial Conservation. Complementing existing "transition discourses" and Indigenous traditions, their form of conservation arises from a myriad of existing alternative proposals, serving to extend ideas of degrowth, post-development and "commoning" into the realm of conservation.

Finally, after stating some caveats, the principles of Convivial Conservation are outlined. Rooted in Ivan Illich's notion of conviviality—"con(with) and 'vivire' (living) or 'living with'"—Convivial Conservation is concerned with "humans to truly 'live with' biodiversity" and developing "affective affinity and other ways of relating with nonhumans irreducible to destructive capitalist ratio" (p. 160-161). Convivialism is opposed to industrialism, and it has five elements (pp. 163-174):

- From protected to promoted areas;
- From saving nature to celebrating human and nonhuman nature;
- From touristic voyeurism to engaged visitation;
- From spectacular to everyday environmentalisms; and
- From privatized expert technocracy to common democratic engagement.

Convivial conservation is about breaking down socio-ecological alienation, or human separation from nature, and changing the politico-economic relationship of (permanent) plunder and exploitation that is designed into capitalism. Moreover, this entails reorienting conservation policy to target the industrially degrading polluters, promoting direct democracy, refashioning finance mechanisms, promoting NGO autonomy from corporate capital and even "adapting existing conservation and development funding schemes, particularly payments for environmental services (PES)" (p. 169).

The conclusion, while restating caveats, confirms the nature-culture dichotomy and the struggle to challenge capitalism. Büscher and Fletcher contend that convivial conservation "is actually not that radical" and only appears so based on a "capitalist realism" (p. 199-200), arguing that convivial conservation is a reasonable proposal in need of uptake and further development to combat the radical anti-environmentalism emblematic of Trump, Bolsonaro and other leaders. The message is to live with and re-connect with (nonhuman) nature(s), while taking action against the militarization and marketization of the planet.

The book offers a thoughtful, gentle and comprehensive overview, matched by an equally sensitive and forceful proposal for a more convivial form of conservation. *The conservation revolution* provides an alternative and comprehensive direction for the stalemate and the impasse that haunts conservation. Overall, the book reads like a smooth and popular literary gem, offering the reader a comfortable review of tensions within conservation research; Marxian and academic debates; and it proposes some new ways for everyone to approach conservation in clear and relatively comprehensive terms. The book, or at least Chapter 5, will become a mandatory read in political ecology, environmental history and conservation courses everywhere.

The book spends a lot of time in Chapters 2-4 situating itself and summarizing Marxian and Eco-Marxian theory. This is a strength, but also illustrates a technological blind spot. In the tradition of Ivan Illich, it is clear that there is an implicit critical engagement and advocacy for "appropriate" or convivial technology, yet drawing heavily on Marxian thinkers their position on organizational and computational technology becomes a bit muddled. Especially, when it comes to conversations about organizational technology and the state, although the issue is discussed (p. 183-186). There are (worrying) differences between Ivan Illich's proposal and Malm's interest in "ecological Leninism"¹ or Simon Springer's (2014, 2017) and Harvey's (2017) debate in *Dialogues in Human Geography*, which clashes over organizational politics. Anti-authoritarian governance versus authoritarian rule, or the balance between them, have technological implications regarding the use of communication technologies, the acceptability of (intense) divisions of labor, political surveillance and, overall, the direction that development takes. Despite the astute analysis of referenced Marxian thinkers, their vision of governmental organization and technological integration gravitate in the opposite direction of less conviviality. Submersion in technological society, and its academic culture, presents a challenge for clarifying and offering a (popular) vision of appropriate technology.

This organizational debate in the text, in other words, preferences academic Marxian scholars, picking a strand of political ecology that de-emphasizes insights from deep (or Taoist) ecology. This relates to the discussion around nature-human-machine "hybridity" (p. 131). There is an unacknowledged dilemma here: "hybrid" labeling implies the existence of a "pure." While the book rejects the notion of "pristine" nature and its runaway "hybridizing", it still dances with categorization that can contradict the author's struggle against the human-nature dichotomy. Rejecting hybrid-pure language in favor of speaking in terms of qualitative differences, forms and natural qualities in places, peoples and relationships might better support their argument.

Moreover, when discussing politics and the state, there are unhelpful omissions or de-emphases. The authors' important criticism of NGOs as self-interested income generating machines (p. 190) would have benefited from considering insurrectionary anarchism's organizational critique—"that which stagnates rots"²—contending that fixed organizational relationships, like in conservation NGOs, frequently become self-interested and, in a word, bureaucratize. More relevant, however, is Murray Bookchin's social ecology and, related, a severely neglected bioregionalism. The approach is developed in Kirkpatrick Sale's³ (2000 [1991]) *Dwellers in the land: the bioregional vision* which outlines a (relatively) anti-authoritarian economic, social and political program that seems complementary and closer to what the author's convivial conservation concept is advocating. There is little-to-no mention of permaculture, forest gardening or no-till farming, but in a convivial landscape in which nature, wildlife and livelihoods are all conserved, humans are an essential agent of ecological restoration, with the ability to amplify the health of fauna and quality of flora within ecosystems. This point, while implicit, is underemphasized in the book. The crescendo sentences stressing the real possibilities for humans to inhabit and improve ecosystems and habitats—with the socio-cultural valuation frameworks outlined and advocated by the authors—are taken for granted throughout the book. Strengthening Convivial Conservation's connection and affinity to Indigenous horticultural practices, forest gardening and permaculture will advance its praxis.

Regardless of this commentary, the book's advocacy for breaking down the culture-nature dichotomy in conservation—and daily life—with (convivial) conservation strategies remains fundamentally important. It includes some degrowth and post-development ideas. Its importance is not just as a scholarly text, but also as a potential galvanizing force within conservation circles and the public at large. The book is highly

¹ See Malm A. 2019. It is time to try out an "ecological Leninism" – Interview with Andreas Malm. Available at: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4450-it-is-time-to-try-out-an-ecological-leninism-interview-with-andreas-malm>.

Note, Deep Green Resistance (DGR) was arguably an experiment with "ecological Leninism", meanwhile The Invisible Committee/*L'Appelists* have articulated a type of environmental Blanquism (or vanguardism) in France, which has arguably mutated into more horizontal and anarchist practices.

² Carlos López. 2014. Mexican prisons: "That which stagnates rots". Available at: <https://waronsociety.noblogs.org/?p=9219>. This source is a shorthand reference to a larger body of theory reflecting on the state and revolutionary struggle.

³ I recognize Sale suffered from adopting conceptions of "pristine nature" in other texts, yet his Bioregional proposal and his others seem to be a complementary force for supporters of Convivial Conservation to reckon with.

recommended for everyone interested in conservation, environmental politics and critical environmental theory. *The Conservation revolution* should be widely read, and the authors are correct to say that their proposition is not a radical one. It is honest and realistic, and the invitation to conduct convivial conservation deserves an expansive uptake in rural and urban areas.

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