



A CRITIQUE OF ECOLOGY: A CONVERSATION WITH BÉRÉNICE LEVET

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Bérénice Levet, philosopher, essayist and author speaks about ecology with Christophe Geffroy, founder and director of *La Nef*. Her latest book, *L'écologie ou l'ivresse de la table rase* (*Ecology, or the Intoxication of the Clean-slate*), offers a thorough and devastating critique of modern ecology and the many movements that it has spawned which now drive the West into all manner of self-destructive postures. She is also the author of *Libérons nous du féminisme!* (*Let's Free Ourselves from Feminism!*) and *Le crépuscule des idoles progressistes* (*The Twilight of Progressive Idols*). We are indeed grateful to *La Nef* for giving us the opportunity to publish this perceptive and delightful interview.

Christophe Geffroy (CG): Although you are severe with a certain kind of ecology, your book nevertheless shows your attachment to real ecology. Could you define ecology as you conceive it? And in what way is ecology "conservative?"

Bérénice Levet (BL): The ecology that I denounce is indeed the ecology as embodied today by *Europe Ecology—The Greens*, or by *Anne Hidalgo* in Paris, and by associative and militant movements. As well, this ecology is a green doxa buzzing away in the cave. That the ecological concern has won us over seems to me a very positive thing. However, preempted by the left, it is a Pyrrhic victory. The victory turns into a defeat for those who are truly concerned about nature, about animals, but also about human beings and the ties that bind them to each other. Indeed, ecology, the word *oikos* defines it, which means habitat, is not the study and the discourse of nature but of the relationships between the living—it is placed at the juncture.

Ecology is conservative in its essence and in its inspiration; it is a concern for the preservation, conservation and continuity of nature; a nature that has proven to be fragile and perishable. Ecology was born with the industrial revolution, when man acquired the means to alter, in an irreversible way, the given of natural. But we must go further. Ecology is conservative in that it carries a philosophy, a certain idea of man that goes against modern philosophy, called progressive, of the untied, disaffiliated, self-sufficient man—it articulates man to what is not him; it reminds us that to be born is to enter a world that was there before us and that must remain after us. And this world is at the same time nature and culture—the form of our civilizations, language, history, arts are realities not less vulnerable than nature; and together, they count; they must be able to count on this creature that is man to take care of them. In other words, ecology poses man as obliged. It thus calls for our gratitude, for our willingness to

see in what is given to us as a donation, a present, a gift.



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A certain idea of man and a certain understanding of life are thus at stake in ecology. True ecology, and not that of [Sandrine Rousseau](#) or [Greta Thunberg](#), enjoins us to rehabilitate human dispositions considered obsolete, judged to be "old-fashioned" and yet so salutary for nature—tact, scruples, consideration; these beautiful notions with obsolete accents must be put back in the center of the game.

CG: The West, with the white European man behind it, is accused of all the evils, especially in ecological matters with industrialization and the unbridled search for growth. How do you handle this accusation?

BL: What is indeed striking, first of all, is the hatred of man. Recall Marcel Gauchet's pioneering article published in the *Revue Le Débat* in 1990: "sous l'amour de la nature, la haine des hommes" (beneath the love of nature, the hatred of men)—which animates our ecologists. To read them, to listen to them, there is no doubt about it—there is too much man on earth. A word has been coined to incriminate human nature and its activities: "Anthropocene." The thesis imposed, conveyed by the most

authoritative voices, is that in the end everything started to go wrong for nature in the Neolithic period, when man became a sedentary farmer and builder. Do people think I am caricaturing? Not at all. And I show this through several examples. The reader can have immediate proof by consulting the February issue of the learned journal *Histoire*: "Néolithique: l'agriculture a-t-elle fait le malheur des hommes?" (The Neolithic: Did Agriculture Create the Misfortune of Humans?)

The question is not a question. The thesis is asserted, peremptorily, since it is not discussed; the editors abandon the monopoly of legitimate speech to the professor of Protohistory, Jean-Paul Demoule, who "proposes to trace the catastrophic effects for the environment back to the Neolithic revolution": "Some people only start the Anthropocene with nuclear energy and the 1950s," he observes, "others with the Industrial Revolution or still others with the great discoveries. One can say that its true beginning coincides with the Neolithic." And the specialist then gives his sanction to ecofeminism—the domination of men on nature and on women are linked; together they emerge in the Neolithic. And the editorial staff of the monthly magazine is behind these conclusions: "There is no question here of denying the way in which technical 'progress' has durably aggravated and often justified predations, massacres, injustices or the domination of men—and women—by men," warns the editorial.

Salvation will come; and the European Union is monitoring the situation, multiplying the decrees in this sense, by the "rewilding" of Europe, no matter what carnage is committed by wolves. No tears for the lambs, the sheep... La Fontaine, from whom I quote a magnificent fable, is no longer with us.

Let us set the record straight. It is not the domestication of the earth that is guilty. I am an advocate of *homo faber*, of man as a builder. Man does not only inhabit the earth as a poet—for in this capacity we would not have lasted long in the bosom of nature—he has the concern to manage this earthly sojourn in order to make nature a hearth, a home, to make it hospitable, friendly to men, which it is not spontaneously. But it is naturally advisable to distinguish between the man who collaborates with nature and the man who exhausts it. As I said, ecology was born with the industrial revolution and the utilitarian mentality, when man began to relate to the natural given as to a stock of resources and substitutes for the care of fertilizing it; this beautiful word, charged with peasant traditions and religious connotations, became the will to make nature productive, profitable.

CG: In what way is political ecology at the service of the "deconstruction of the old world," in connection with intersectional feminism, decolonialism, Islamism, wokism, "cancel culture?"

BL: Ecology exults, more or less under the radar, in adding its share of victims, of which the West, according to the ideologies you mention, is the great factory. After, and with, women, homosexuals, lesbians, gays and other BTQI, blacks, Muslims, in short, the "racialized," here now comes danger for the earth, the animals, the climate.

Ecologists have made their own the grand narrative of a Western civilization whose entire history has been written by the heterosexual Catholic or Jewish white man, and whose mainspring of action is the domination of everything that is not him—domination, or rather predation.

I have observed that since the emergence of the me-too movement, the predator/prey pair tends to supplant the dominant/dominated pair. We understand why—the portrait of the white man as a predator, in other words as a carnivore, has something infinitely more formidable. If in 1990, Gauchet could detect beneath the love of nature, the hatred of man, over time things have become clearer—beneath the love of nature, it is the hatred of Western man that prevails. And this thesis is defended by the most authoritative voices, in particular a professor at the College de France, Philippe Descola. "De-Westernizing" is our only way out.

CG: You say, with Paul Valéry, that all politics implies a certain idea of man. What is the idea of man for the ecologists?

BL: On the one hand, the "man" of the ecologists is a man without a past, without history, without temporal depth, flattened on the present alone; a living being in short. The prestige of the first name "Zoe," among families said to be ecologically aware, is in this respect revealing. Zoe is life in the biological sense of the term; strictly human life in Greek is called bios, which is found in "biography."

The man of the environmentalists may cultivate his garden, but he is not connected to any historically constituted community. The idea of the school defended by ecologists is a good indicator in this respect: it is a school that definitively renounces getting people to know, understand and love civilization; the form of life specific to the country, whose child is called to become a member and a citizen, for which, in other words, he will have to answer. [Jadot](#) promises a school which allows the child, like a flower, to "blossom," busy, as already in the cities run by ecologists, "tending a vegetable patch," in establishments with "disgendered playgrounds."

That rootedness, [in the sense](#) that the philosopher Simone Weil attaches to this notion, the inscription in a place but not less in a history, is the most fundamental need of the human soul, is perfectly foreign to the environmentalists, and even makes them pull out their hair. Ecology was, is the occasion to answer this need after decades of contempt. But, and to paraphrase Rousseau (the philosopher), ecologists are men of paradoxes, because they are men of prejudices; they are desperately dependent on morally qualified mental nodes, proper to the progressive conscience. Roots are bad; and environmentalists remain globalists.

But this is only the one side. Ecologists are desperately of their time; and they are perfectly committed to the ideology, of Anglo-Saxon import, of diversity and identity. The individual must be recognized, exalted in his particular affiliations, his gendered, sexual, ethnic, religious identity. Nothing is more legitimate for them than the thundering claim to "visibility." Man no longer has a soul for them; he has an identity. It is no coincidence that the mayor of Grenoble, Éric Piolle, finds himself completely flummoxed when the Islamist wind blows through the demand for the right to wear a burkini, a seaside burqa, in the municipal swimming pools. The policy of "cultural rights" that he practices, in the cities of which they have become the princes, because of the municipal elections of June 2020, is another masterful example.

CG: Faced with ecological problems, "the West harbors its own antibodies," you write. What are they, and how can they "solve" the ecological problem?

BL: The West conceals its own antibodies because the West, in its noble inspiration and in its glorious achievements, has never ceased to affirm and attest that man is dedicated to a nobler task than that of consuming, exhausting, destroying. Our history cannot be reduced to a history of pillage and oppression.

Western civilization, provided it finds its soul, conceals treasures to respond to the ecological crisis; and particularly France whose genius, that is to say the spirit, the inspiration, is not economic. France against robots, against the mechanization of the world, against exclusively utilitarian logic. Bernanos mobilized his contemporaries by reminding them of the French singularity. We must regain this confidence, this faith in our model of civilization, and of which Madame de Staël made the adage, "grace, taste, cheerfulness," resonate magnificently. There is measure in French composition.

Obviously, I do not claim to hold the key that would make it possible to "solve" the ecological problem;

but one thing is certain—salvation does not necessarily, inevitably, pass through de-Westernization—there is Western faith in man, the meaning we give to human adventure, as research, investigation, the thirst and the pride to know, to understand, to shape our sojourn here.

What, in the West, is to be questioned is the only thing that ecologists not only do not challenge but exalt—modern anthropology, called progressive, of man as an entity entering society fully armed, self-sufficient; this philosophy of unbinding, the idea of the individual as a subject with rights to assert. Rather than starting with rights, we should have started with duties, corrected Simone Weil, whose *Rooted* bears the subtitle “Prelude to a declaration of duties towards mankind.” All the misfortune of men, says the philosopher in essence, comes from the fact that they are as if in levitation on the earth. But it is through the links that we weave with other men, with the earth, with animals that we attach ourselves to something, so that life takes on its meaning. Nothing uglier, she said, than a man without loyalty.

Ecology cannot and must not be the primary policy. To rebuild a sustainable world, we must start again with people. To be repatriated on earth and in our lands. Ecology calls for a policy of civilization, of civilized man. Let us form, let us cultivate, I repeat, those properly human dispositions—without which there is no civilization—scruples, torments, the capacity to admire.

CG: Faced with the depletion of nature, you advocate a certain “self-limitation.” Could you explain it to us, and in what way is this self-limitation different from the “happy sobriety” advocated by the followers of degrowth?

BL: I separate myself from degrowth advocates, as I separate myself from all problem-solvers. The virtue of the moment we are living, if we knew how to grasp it, is to be “returned to the harsh reality to be embraced,” to be as if summoned to become, to become again “peasant,” according to the word of Rimbaud that I placed in the opening of my book.

I am wary of big words, of those who hold themselves to be the enlightened avant-garde, and as such hold themselves to be authorized to supervise and punish. To be ecologists is, and should be, to renew with the particular, with the carnal reality. Self-limitation, a term that I borrow from Solzhenitsyn, comes to remind man that he is to himself, and for himself, instance of limitation. We are too accustomed to ask the law to stop us, to prevent us from conceiving everything and to forbid us to dare to do everything, as Tocqueville said of religion. But, with freedom, Leo Strauss says, we have been given a

kind of "sacred terror," "the presentiment that not everything is allowed." Certainly, among some, and in particular among the ecologists, ardent militants of medically assisted procreation, of surrogacy, this sacred terror is stifled. This is why, nothing was more antinomic, and frightening, than to hear the [EELV](#) candidate for the Presidency of the Republic, Yannick Jadot, vociferate, during the meeting at Lyon, "We are the life impulse. We are life." Life is voracious. It follows its course, indifferent to all that surrounds it.

CG: You evoke [Lynn White](#), who accused Christianity of being at the origin of the ecological crisis (1967). How do you respond to this accusation?

BL: I see this book as a reply to the prosecutors of the West, who are eager to turn young people, in particular, into a court of inquisition. We must not leave the last word to the contemptuous of our civilization. Elevated to universal consciousness, flattered by adults, Greta Thunberg, dark-eyed, thunders against the West, of which she knows nothing except that it is guilty; and everyone bends and folds.

Christianity is in fact the indefatigable defendant in the great ecological trial, with, alas, sometimes the complacency and the spirit of repentance of the Catholics themselves, willingly inclined to beat their chests. Christianity, like Judaism, supposedly granted to men the power to subjugate the beasts and the whole of nature, and the words of Genesis and the words of God after the Fall are repeated. Now, the imputation is more than hasty; the letter sins here against the spirit, because Christianity is a philosophy of finitude—man is a creature; therefore dependent on a Creator, not everything is allowed to him—created in the image of God, man cannot with impunity degrade himself [I have reversed the order of the propositions]; nature, the work of God, is entrusted to him, handed over to his care; he is its depositary, not its owner; created in the image of God, man cannot degrade himself with impunity.

And then, historical reason, which makes the ineptitude of the lawsuit striking—it is in a dechristianized world that the reduction of nature to an object of exploration and of scientific and technical exploitation is inaugurated; in other words, in a world where religion is not sufficiently alive to prevent from conceiving everything and to defend from daring everything. I recall moreover that it is in a fully Christian Occident that the most beautiful and the most profound pictorial and musical hymns to nature were made. See and hear.

CG: Descartes, who is said to despise nature and animals, is put in the dock by ecologists. Do you plead

not guilty?

BL: I am not pleading not guilty; but here again I cannot accept that a philosopher like Descartes should be reduced to two formulas, which have been retracted. Incidentally, our era has the formidable ability to hide its laziness under virtuous indignation, and this is how it dispenses with reading the great authors of the past centuries by accusing them of complicity with evil; it dispenses with, but also and more wrongly, it deprives the younger generations of interacting with these immense and such delightful and deep and fertile minds. Descartes is one of them; and I have tried to communicate the passion I have for this outstanding writer. I have therefore reopened the file.

The theory of the animal as a clockwork was constantly discussed and disputed in Madame de la Sablière's salon, which was frequented by La Fontaine, one of the most severe critics of the French philosopher. I quote three magnificent fables which are as many replies to Descartes. But Descartes himself admits the controversy, responds to it, argues, nuances.

Finally, the animal-machine is not the last word from France on this question. There is La Fontaine, but also Buffon, whom we hardly read anymore, but whose [*Natural History*](#) left a strong mark on our culture.

The exhibition at the Palace of Versailles, "[Les Animaux du roi](#)" ("The King's Animals"), which has just closed its doors but whose catalog remains, shows to what extent we have had, our painters of course but also our kings, eyes to see and marvel at the beauty of animals. Let us not be intimidated by those contemptuous of the West, on this point, as on all the others.

[Featured image:](#) "Allegory of Europe," by Jean-Baptiste Oudry; painted in 1722.

