



Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*, New York: Verso, 2020. ISBN: 9781788737715 (paper); ISBN: 9781788737739 (ebook); ISBN: 9781788737708 (cloth)

It takes quite a bit of bravery to turn critique, no matter how robust, into a plan for politically engaged action. Those most adept at critique are well aware of the fact that the moment they down critical tools and replace them with constructive ones, they are opening themselves up to the groundswell of critique with which they are intimately familiar. With this in mind, I welcomed *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* and its constructive ways of rethinking and doing conservation. Written by Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, both at the Sociology of Development and Change Group at Wageningen University, and both of whom are colleagues with whom I have closely worked, this book represents a radical call to action. Its radicality, according to its authors, is embodied by its depth of focus on what they identify as the capitalist roots of the ecological challenges of the Anthropocene, rather than by the breadth of the argument's difference from other ideas on rethinking conservation in and beyond the Anthropocene.

The Conservation Revolution was, for me, a refreshing read in bleak times. It struck the right balance between realism and hopeful optimism by putting forward ideas for conserving nature that do not simply imagine ways of being outside of capitalism, but that recognize the need to remedy capitalist conservation's cumulative negative effects. Pulling together arguments developed over decades of ethnographic research on conservation around the world, this book makes an outsized contribution to the conservation debate, a debate mired by increasing recognition of conservation's failure to address staggering biodiversity loss and accelerating climate change, to name a few of the challenges facing the world today. At a time when capitalist activity has eroded not just the earth's ecosystems, but our capacity for imagining paths outside its confines, many streams of academic work have been dedicating themselves toward imagining

other ways of being (see, for example, Kothari 2014; Mastini et al. 2021; Raworth 2017). Büscher and Fletcher join this confluence of proposals, wading bravely into the realm of imagination by putting forward a view of an alternative reality for conservation. Their conceptualization and introduction of “convivial conservation” is novel. It provides an umbrella for raucous, jostling, divergent, overlapping and contentious strands of political thought on how to save nature from capitalism in the time of the Anthropocene. The book is a hopeful take on simultaneously looming and ongoing disaster, calling on us all to join the revolution.

The book makes its arguments by first identifying and naming the main camps of the Anthropocene conservation debate. An overview of this debate is provided in Chapter 1. Büscher and Fletcher identify mainstream conservation, neoprotectionist approaches, and new conservationism. Mainstream conservation, seen as the most established, is described as internally diverse but consistent in its development in tandem with capitalism’s spread. Neoprotectionists, understood as those advocating for conservation through barriers, are characterized by their reliance on the physical, spatial separation of the human from swathes of nature deemed worthy of conservation. Finally, new conservationists are described as those who no longer seek to fight explicitly against capitalism, but who advocate for a continued relationship between capitalist development practices and conservation, seeking out opportunities for saving nature in the midst of this milieu, or even through the expansion of capitalist ideals. In Chapter 2, Büscher and Fletcher trace the origins of the nature-culture dichotomy that lies at the heart of their concerns and that, they argue, forms a site of constant, though underacknowledged, tension in the arguments of other sides of the debate. In Chapter 3, the authors argue that conservation and capitalist development are closely intertwined in complicated ways that are evolving in the contemporary era. In Chapter 4, they argue that those viewpoints grouped as neoprotectionist and new conservationist are beset by contradictions rooted in their neglect of the fundamental connections between capitalism and the nature-culture dichotomy. However, these positions in the debate are identified as valuable for their “radical

and political potential” (p.11). Harnessing that potential by combining it with insights from the intellectual tradition of political ecology, Büscher and Fletcher propose in Chapter 4 common theoretical ground for alternative proposals. In Chapter 5, building on the work of Ivan Illich, they set out their vision of “postcapitalist and non-dualist” (p.160) “convivial conservation”, or living with nature, which relies on the following key principles: that though reality is socially constructed, everything is not relative; that “‘nature’ and ‘society’ are dialectically integrated” (p.142); that conservation is not development’s oppositional force, but “an element within a broader process of ‘uneven geographical development’” (p.143); and, finally, that the system through which we ascribe value to nature matters. Hence, the valuation of nature should not be the exclusive domain of those interested in capital accumulation.

Büscher and Fletcher deem five shifts necessary for “convivial conservation”. The first depends on a transition from protected areas, the preferred instrument of neoprotectionists, to promoted areas, through which meaningful relationships between humans and nature are encouraged and nature is protected *for* humans, rather than *from* humans. The second shift moves away from saving nonhuman nature from other humans but celebrates instead both human and nonhuman nature in their diversity and uniqueness. The third shift depends on a turn away from tourism as an elitist, consumerist escape from the “destructive dynamics of global capitalism” (p.169) towards “long-term visitation focused on social and ecological justice” (p.169). The penultimate shift necessitates a move away from conservation through the idealization of spectacles of nature towards a “focus on ‘everyday nature’, in all its splendor and mundaneness” (p.171). The final shift replaces abstract, top-down, technocratic and alienating means of managing nature with democratic engagement through which everyone can live with all locally valued nature. These shifts are to be made possible through reparations for those previously disenfranchised by conservation, the provision of conservation basic income to those living in or near significant conservation areas, altered relations between conservation and corporations, the establishment of a “convivial conservation coalition” and transformations “in the governing of

space” (p.191). These transformations entail the construction of conservation landscapes that integrate humans and nonhumans instead of separating them, that govern conservation in these spaces in different ways, and that develop funding arrangements independent of market expansion.

Throughout the book, Büscher and Fletcher delight in pointing out the contradictions of other approaches to conservation in the Anthropocene, arguing that they all rely on sticky separations between nature and culture to different degrees, and that these separations are fundamental to capitalism’s functioning. In their words, “conservation and capitalism have intrinsically co-produced each other, and hence the nature-culture dichotomy is foundational to both” (p.72). Drawing on Marxist literature, they root their argument of the inherent unsustainability of capital in the combination of two conditions of capitalism – the metabolic rift and alienation – both related to the nature-culture divide. They rebuke some of the literature on the Anthropocene that shares their concern with the nature-culture dichotomy but that extols the virtues of integrating non-human nature and objects as active agents in bringing about outcomes through “hybridist monism”. They argue that although the nature-culture dichotomy is problematic, a distinction between nature and society is important for effective ecological politics. This is because although nature and society are “dialectically integrated” (p.142), it is only by distinguishing their constituent parts that “we can meaningfully understand the relations that constitute their inter-relation” (p.130). Büscher and Fletcher make clear that for them, conservation is about politics. The attribution of cause and effect, even in co-constitutive systems of relation, is therefore essential. “It is, most importantly, about creating (more) effective political alliances that challenge vested (capitalist) power structures and interests. The goal, then, is to not only stimulate more debate across the sciences, but to actively create networks and alliances across disciplines for taking political action” (p.135-136).

However, while I share this sentiment, the call for debate across the sciences gives me pause for thought. Conservation biologist Meredith Root-Bernstein’s (2020: 120) review of the

book has already provided a caution to this optimism after having found her desire for an “ecology- and environment-centred perspective on how to concretely reform the economic system, conceived for conservation scientists” still unmet after reading this book. In her words, “part of this problem was the book’s focus on political ecology discourse, which is too jargony and limited in scope to appeal to a mass of potential non-political ecologist followers, along with its lack of case studies or evidence” (ibid.). While I myself cannot fault a book for not meeting expectations that it did not set itself, I do find Root-Bernstein’s assessment of its “jargon” to be indicative of the challenge to this cross-disciplinary ambition. I, a self-described political ecologist, had little trouble understanding the book’s aims, the traditions on which it builds, and the debates it enters, after having been steeped in this scholarship for years in part under the tutelage of the authors themselves. But then I am not the audience that Büscher and Fletcher are seeking to persuade. We cannot easily dismiss Root-Bernstein’s concerns and their implications for the potential of cross-disciplinary engagement.

In taking the book’s arguments forward, I look to the past, or in this case, towards the past events that shaped the Anthropocene as, in the words of Kathryn Yusoff (2018: 42), “a ubiquitous planetary mark in the strata [that] consecrates the epochal shift”. Büscher and Fletcher rightly observe that “humans cannot overcome the ‘age of humans’”, but can and must “overcome the ‘age of capital’” (p.116). In making the argument to conceptualize this new “epoch” as the Capitalocene rather than the Anthropocene, the authors point to critiques of the Anthropocene that allege that the concept “conceals the reality that different groups of people have vastly different environmental impacts behind the image of a generalized ‘humanity’” (p.4). It is here though that I was left wishing for more of a challenge to the category of the human, focusing perhaps on exactly which groups of humans should be overcome. This differentiation received little attention. While it is true that the authors do not position their argument directly as a challenge to the Anthropocene, but as more of an opportunity for engaging in productive debate and politics of ecology, much of the literature critical of the Anthropocene challenges its

underlying idea of an undifferentiated humanity in ways that upend ascriptions of novelty to the current epoch. In critical discussions on race, the Anthropocene has been criticised for having obfuscated the groups of humans referred to as “Anthropos”, allying white Western identities and their roles in bringing about our current state of ecological decline with that of indigenous, black and other groups of people who suffered throughout the concept’s material ascendance. Replacing “Anthropos” with “Capital” does not sufficiently address these differences since capital and its operations are also increasingly recognized as being gendered (Federici 2004) and raced (Bhattacharyya 2018).

After reading *The Conservation Revolution*, I was left wondering whether the authors’ thoughts would have been different had they problematized the category of the human and its racialized, gendered and power laden differentials and dynamics. Hence, while I do agree with Ruchi Patel’s (2020) lauding of the book’s “attention to the historical and contemporary dynamics of colonialism, dispossession and displacement associated with conservation” and its suggestions for redressing social injustices through reparations, I would have liked this awareness more deeply reflected throughout the book, rather than partly addressed through remedial actions in the conception of “convivial conservation”. The book’s embrace of the space created for reflecting on conservation failures and opportunities by the Anthropocene could be read as an embrace of the concept’s exclusionary, colonial and racialized lineage. Hence, in line with the authors’ call for rooted radicality through an explicit recognition of the origins of (mainstream) conservation and the challenges it seeks to address, there was certainly room for engagement with the historical roots of the events informing the Anthropocene itself.

In other words, if we take seriously that capitalism is the at the root of conservation and its problems, we might refocus on the fuel provided to capitalism’s rise by colonial histories of oppression along racial (Quijano 2000), gendered (Lugones 2016) and other lines. *The Conservation Revolution*’s attention to the rootedness of capital in conservation’s failings fits with the argument that human and non-human deaths associated with the dominance of some

humans have always been with us (Yusoff 2018). The only difference now, perhaps, is that these threats are making themselves felt by those who benefited historically from these forms of oppression associated with the rise of capitalism – the white Western Anthropos. Hence, in paying attention to some roots rather than others, i.e. the capitalist roots of conservation rather than to the capitalist roots of racial, gendered and other forms of oppression, the authors missed an opportunity to identify yet another means through which the Anthropocene conservation debate could have been upended – the doing away with cumulative “cenes” and “epochs” altogether. There is a rich, diverse world marginalized by the events that fuelled the Anthropocene. This world does not align with the characteristics of “Anthropos” in ways that reflect the nature-culture divide. In engaging in the Anthropocene conservation debate, the power dynamics informing the histories through which the concept emerged remain unaddressed, dynamics that would have synergized with the pinpointing of capitalism as the root of the problem. Nevertheless, I welcome the invitation to join the revolution.

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