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## **BOOK REVIEWS**

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**Peter Dauvergne**

**Environmentalism of the Rich**

MIT Press, Cambridge, 2016, 218pp., \$56, hardback.

**Reviewed by Robert MacNeil**

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the modern environmental movement burst onto the scene as a reaction to the unchecked destruction of nature by industrial capitalism. Over the succeeding five decades, environmental activists have not only racked up an incredibly long list of political and legislative victories, but have also imbued citizens, governments, and corporations across much of the world with a broad spirit of environmental values. Indeed, by almost any metric, the environmental movement is among the most successful social, economic, and political movements in modern history. Yet, despite the impressive rise of environmentalism over the past 50 years, the pace of ecological degradation has rapidly increased, with effectively every major global environmental indicator moving in the wrong direction. This situation poses an important question: if environmentalism is a bigger and broader force than ever, why is human civilization sprinting even faster toward the precipice of environmental collapse?

In his new book *Environmentalism of the Rich*, Peter Dauvergne argues that much of the blame can be placed on modern environmentalism itself. While the author duly acknowledges the movement's impressive accomplishments over the years – which, as he notes, include over a thousand multilateral environmental treaties and tens of thousands of domestic regulations – he argues that contemporary environmentalism has entered into a state of moral crisis. According to Dauvergne, over the past couple decades, the movement has been commandeered by a new paradigm that he calls the 'environmentalism of the rich' – an approach focused on promoting weak, corporate-led solutions to the environmental crisis, like so-called 'eco-business', 'eco-consumption', and corporate social responsibility. As the author suggests:

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This environmentalism of the rich is spreading by the day. Its policies, principles, and practices appear under various guises. Governments like to call it 'sustainable development', where growth in production remains the top priority. Corporations like to call it 'corporate social responsibility', where sustainability is defined as the eco-business of pursuing environmental efficiencies and savings to enhance growth in profits, and not as a way of protecting the ecological integrity of life on earth. For NGOs, environmentalism of the rich manifests as 'business partnerships', 'eco-product fundraising', and 'market solutions'. For individuals, it is a belief in the power of 'eco-consumerism', in small lifestyle changes as forces of progressive change – walking a recycling bin to the curbside, taking shorter showers, and buying eco-products – even as overall consumption continues to rise (p. 4).

For Dauvergne, 'environmentalism of the rich' has two particularly disturbing features. First is its unabashed promotion of consumerism. According to the author, this paradigm has fostered the idea that individuals can purchase their way to sustainability by simply buying more efficient products, and taking small steps to reduce energy and water usage. Dauvergne argues that, while these minor changes are laudable as individual acts, they can actually be quite harmful when promoted as a substitute for real action and resistance. As he notes:

recycling a Starbucks cup or Coke bottle does nothing to address the subjugation and marginalisation of the world's least protected peoples and most vulnerable ecosystems...yet such efforts are now defining feature of environmentalism in wealthy countries (p. 42).

The second major aspect of this shift, according to Dauvergne, has to do with the extent to which environmental NGOs have partnered with large multi-national corporations over the past two decades. The author suggests that, as green NGOs have developed large bureaucracies of professional staffers, they have been compelled to seek corporate funding simply to maintain their operations. As these partnerships have evolved over the past generation, Dauvergne argues that green groups have been largely co-opted by their corporate partners, who effectively use them to increase the legitimacy of their brand, and exacerbate the underlying problem of excessive consumption that lies at the heart of the ecological crisis. For Dauvergne, these partnerships have gradually sapped any remaining revolutionary potential from these groups. No longer can they strike at the systemic roots of the environmental crisis by calling for an overhaul of consumer capitalism. Rather, they blindly

embrace capitalism and consumerism as solutions (rather than as causes) of unsustainability, while states and multinational businesses are progressively capturing ecological discourses and subsuming environmental networks, deploying the language of sustainability to obfuscate, and in some instances even promote, unsustainable and inequitable consumption (p. 14).

Despite his concerns, Dauvergne is nevertheless quick to give credit where it is due. He notes that this 'environmentalism of the rich' has slowly made international trade, multinational corporations, and industrialisation a little less exploitative and a little less destructive. Moreover, he is quick to acknowledge the enticing allure of environmentalism of the rich. As a strategy, it is extremely optimistic and pragmatic, and offers an alternative to the pessimism and constraints of the early environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s. While the old environmentalism offered regulations and limitations on personal freedoms, the new one promises innovation, wealth creation, new technologies, and greater consumption. Yet, as Dauvergne laments, for all its alluring promises,

the gains are not adding up to anything approaching global sustainability. Resulting reforms are modest and incremental, rarely scaling up to improve global conditions as firms reinvest efficiency gains, as certification and regulation deflect production into new locations and sectors, as multinational corporations ramp up production in less regulated markets, and as unsustainable consumption continues to rise (p. 142).

In short, the real problem with the 'environmentalism of the rich' is not the degree of affluence of its adherents, but rather a general loss of a 'spirit of outrage' at the political, economic, and cultural structures that cause and exacerbate the environmental crisis. For Dauvergne, modern environmentalism has lost the critical edge that once allowed it to act as a much-needed counter force to consumer capitalism. In its place, the movement has embraced a 'spirit of compromise' with these structures, which has effectively neutralised the movement, and driven humanity closer to disaster.

There is much to praise about *Environmentalism of the Rich*. From its compelling historical narratives and vivid storytelling (tracing the roots of the current crisis back to early European imperialism and the industrial revolution), to its illuminating account of our current ecological predicament (providing a confronting look at the extent of the climate

crisis, species extinction, and resource depletion), to its thoughtfully selected case studies (presenting the reader with the destructive practices of multinational corporations in some of the poorest part of the world), Dauvergne's analysis will inform and startle even the most seasoned environmental scholar or activist.

Perhaps most praiseworthy is Dauvergne's bold and unapologetic assessment of contemporary environmentalism. His combination of a remarkably blunt appraisal of the current predicament, coupled with an extremely well researched empirical study and theoretical analysis, is something one rarely sees these days. Particularly important is the author's refreshingly realistic assessment of mainstream groups like Greenpeace, WWF, Nature Conservancy, Wilderness Society, Environmental Defense Fund, Conservation International, among others. Dauvergne directly challenges these (and many other) mainstream organisations to acknowledge the extent to which they have been, in effect, co-opted through their various corporate partnerships, as well as the extent to which they have shed any focus on the structural roots of the ecological crisis. He is likewise relentless in his criticism of major brands like Coca-Cola, Nestle, Wal-Mart, McDonalds, and others, highlighting the extent to which their apparent embrace of environmentalism masks their abysmal environmental histories, and merely aims to legitimize their continued irresponsible behaviour.

As an academic text, established scholars may not discover anything particularly novel about much of Dauvergne's theoretical analysis. Much of it draws on well-established concepts like the 'treadmill of production', 'passive revolution', and the ideas of early environmental texts like the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, Paul Erlich's *Population Bomb*, and Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle*. Moreover, his analysis arguably could have been strengthened a great deal by including a more trenchant and explicit critique of capitalism, particularly one that explained the nature of the system's irresolvable growth imperative. Other readers may be somewhat disappointed by the general lack of prescriptive solutions put forth by the author. Beyond calling for a stronger 'spirit of outrage' among activists and a renewed movement that focuses on the limits of corporate-led solutions, Dauvergne basically shies away from prescribing any specific strategies for environmentalists.

Importantly, however, Dauvergne's objective in this book is not to produce an academic tome that covers all of these bases. The book is

written primarily for a general audience, and, in this context, it succeeds quite nicely at concisely combining the insights of many of the canonical works of environmental political theory with a broader call to action for environmentalists. And though its lack of prescriptions may leave some readers feeling a bit disappointed and confused, its call for a fundamental transformation of modern environmentalism is, nevertheless, extremely compelling and important.

### **Geoff Mann**

#### **In the long run we are all dead: Keynesianism, political economy and revolution**

Verso, London, 2017, 416pp., \$40, hardback.

#### **Reviewed by Geoff Dow**

‘Keynes was in no way the first Keynesian’, Geoff Mann announces in the preface to this important – and highly readable – book. What the author is invoking is the series of dilemmas known to those who tried to consolidate public policy (in the face of popular resistance) after the French Revolution, as well as to Hegel who understood that catastrophic situations could be transcended only by what we could call ‘humanity-affirming’ institutionalizations. The link to Keynes’s battles is clear. Keynesianism can be seen as a generic experience in all polities – a quest to maximize achievements when utopian ambitions are not achievable. ‘Keynesian reason’ applies whenever we (citizens, intellectuals) need to move beyond the critique of damaging orthodoxies to construct effective policy while maintaining a civilized society – sometimes this may involve merely putting off disaster (‘while there is peace, there is peace’: p.14)), sometimes animating more lasting capacities (for example, ‘revolution without revolution’: pp.27, 173)).

By these means, non-universal, non-abstract political economy is confirmed as the ‘science of government’; civilization works to forestall ‘existential anxiety’ (p.7); and Keynesianism is essentially Machiavellian (p.11). Keynesianism recognizes that politics is inevitable, that a radically different world is possible now, even when some problems remain beyond the reach of immediate pragmatism (p.55).