

**Christopher J. Orr, Kaitlin Kish and Bruce Jennings (eds)**  
***Liberty and the Ecological Crisis: Freedom on a Finite Planet***

New York, NY: Routledge, 2019

ISBN: 978-367-34677-5 (PB) \$48.91. xiii + 276pp.

The relation between freedom and ecology is wicked and complex. Liberty without limits has helped create ecological crises that seemingly defy resolution. At the same time, agency guided by experiences of freedom may help provide a way forward. This superb collection of critical essays, suitable for advanced undergraduates and scholars alike, explores the wicked problem of freedom and ecology deftly. Drawing on work by environmental ethicists, political theorists, economists and activists that spans ancient and contemporary Western thought, the authors skilfully show that liberty – particularly the illusion of liberal individualism – is one of the main drivers of ecological crises in the Anthropocene. Though chapters differ in how or whether liberty/freedom can be rehabilitated, the book makes compelling arguments that re-imagining ideas and practices of freedom is an important component in the transition to, in the words of the authors, an ‘adjacent possible’ Ecozoic age.

The book argues that liberty is a proximate cause of harms to ecology and society. Undergirding an ideology of domination and control, theorists of freedom have for centuries supported the extractive capitalism of people and resources, nationalism and colonialism guided by growth imperatives in production and consumption, and an ontology of self that is abstract, autonomous and pre-political. The critique of possessive individualism will feel familiar to many readers. And while at times the authors portray liberal individualism as a straw man with a refrain that feels repetitive, they make a persuasive case that freedom shouldn’t be abandoned in green thought and praxis.

But the ‘undertow of modernity’ makes arguing for a green version of freedom in the Anthropocene difficult. A tension quickly emerges in the opening chapter. A transition to sustainable ways of life rooted in freedom will be seen as restrictions on liberty in the short term (p. 5). A key to rescuing freedom from this political morass, where greens see liberty as a virulent problem and anti-greens frame environmental policies as undermining freedom, is to make this transition as quickly as possible. This means demonstrating that green options support human flourishing and convincing sceptics that exploiting people, the planet, and other species is not commensurate with responsible freedom (p. 107). If the mask controversy in the current pandemic is any indication – where a simple individual restriction on liberty yields collective freedom and health for all – this may be a tall order.

The authors persuasively insist that the discursive context of freedom in green politics and ethics needs to be changed. The book argues that ethical obligations need not be seen as restrictions on freedom. Further, the intersection of freedom with other values, such as equity, justice and non-domination,

## REVIEWS

form the basis of collective liberation. Several chapters explore how relinquishing domination and control of nature helps release us from toxic forms of liberty. Particularly compelling are chapters about the relation of freedom to sustainable livelihoods (Quilley), anarchist prefigurative politics (Kish), civic republicanism (Cannavo), transformative nature experiences (Stephens), climate activism and resilience (Karp), adaptation through alternative narratives (Sterlin), levels of social complexity (Quilley), and heroic, creative thought (Orr and Brown).

The strongest attempts to theorise what green freedom looks like come through arguments about the ontology of the self. It is a historic aberration to see the self as separate from social and ecological contexts. As Sterlin argues, climate change and species extinctions are not inexorable – they come from a particular style of living animated by a narrow kind of liberty (p. 175). In different ways, the authors argue that envisioning an ecological self that is interdependent with communities of life is possible and desirable. This embeddedness of self in society and nature is generative and brings forth attendant values such as vulnerability, solidarity, and responsibility to future generations. Authors invite the reader to imagine ‘concrete utopias’ where experimentation, collective self-rule, and social adaptation is lit by experiences of creative freedom in thought and action.

As Jennings, Kish and Orr claim in the Introduction, a green conception of freedom is not collectivist, authoritarian, paternalistic or communitarian. It is a relational freedom defined by interdependence, equal dignity, inclusive democratic participation, and tenets of care, mutuality and non-domination. Unlike deontological and utilitarian ethics, which assume a rational and free individual weighing rules or consequences, many of the authors explore the freedom to construct a self in harmony with ecological conditions. For several authors, virtue ethics is more suited to a task focused on flourishing as a philosophical goal and action that is experimental, exemplary, and open to multiple ways of inhabiting a green society. Does the book present a coherent liberatory theory for green politics or environmental ethics, as Val Plumwood would put it? Not exactly (and I’m not sure such a thing is possible), but it certainly lays important groundwork for what comes next. I can foresee a subsequent volume that interrogates already-existing and newly-emerging pathways of food, energy, rewilding and participatory green politics in a global context.

The book is on less secure footing when it comes to integrating ecology into its core arguments. Many chapters are solidly grounded in debates in political theory and ethics, but sometimes the environment or ecology fades into the background. In this way, some chapters have a strong anthropocentric focus and would benefit from a more explicit treatment of how the ideas they discuss impact ecosystems or other life-forms. Additionally, the chapters generally do a better job discussing ethics than politics, and would gain from explicitly confronting issues of race and class. Another criticism is that the book is

## REVIEWS

almost exclusively rooted in Western scholarly literature and philosophical traditions. A considered effort to include a comparative component that discusses non-Western perspectives *as different modalities of green freedom* would make the volume much more global in its outlook. Engagement with Asian, African or indigenous philosophies, or a study of environmental movements in the global South, are examples of an ‘adjacent possible’ that the book professes to investigate. Global environmental problems require global perspectives and action taking place on local levels can serve as models elsewhere.

These criticisms aside, those interested in understanding the role of liberty in causing ecological crises and the potential of freedom to facilitate ways out of the Anthropocene will find this volume thought-provoking and inspiring. As one of the first book-length treatments of this subject matter, it is a timely introduction to a crucial series of debates that will help define what Jaspers calls an Axial age of transformation: an era where old certainties lose their validity and new ways of knowing and being emerge (p. 257). The transition to an Ecozoic era necessitates creativity, reflexivity and ‘educated hope’ (p. 261). Theorists, activists and practitioners would be wise to sit with this book and reflect on the mutually enhancing relationship between living more ecologically and freedom of thought, choice and action. We need both big-picture thinking that challenges our consciousness and quotidian techniques that make ecological virtues a habit. As Orr and Brown argue in the final chapter, freedom plays a role in *envisioning* possibilities ‘glimpsed at the horizon of reality’ (p. 263). Sharing a world with other life-forms while reducing social inequities and suffering should be seen as internal – not external – to projects of liberty and freedom.

JASON LAMBACHER  
University of Washington-Bothell, USA