

## **Bernard Charbonneau: Regionalism and the Politics of Experience**

Political ecologists have long lamented the destruction of bioregions, ecosystems and communities by a rampant and rapacious capitalism. As daunting as the task may have appeared, the general outlines of the oppositional project have seemed relatively clear. The nature of a truly ecological alternative to the dominant order has appeared much less clear. The art of creating a balance between flourishing human and natural communities is not something that emerges automatically out of the critique of and opposition to capitalist predation. We know from the history of classic revolutionary struggles that the quest to seize the means of production can often turn into a seizure *by* the means of production. As Nietzsche warned, when we fight monsters we might keep in mind the possibility of turning into them.

So in the search for socially and ecologically regenerative alternatives, some have looked to traditions that have preserved certain values and practices that might contribute to the creation of an ecological society. Many have turned for inspiration to tribal communities that have maintained a balanced, caring relationship with the land, often across hundreds of generations.<sup>1</sup> We might also look to certain submerged traditions within the developed (that is, the hyper-developed and mal-developed) world for guidance. Among these are regionalist traditions. I would like to discuss in particular the contribution that French regionalist thought can make to the regenerative problematic within political ecology.

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<sup>1</sup>Ecofeminist thought has been particularly helpful in this area. See, for example, "A Barefoot Epistemology," in Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism As Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997).

This might seem a rather surprising choice. The France that has been most familiar to the English-speaking intellectual world has been that of official French culture. It is the France of stylish Parisian philosophy and literary trends, of the Parisian press and the state bureaucracy, of the Cartesian mind and the French Academy, of the official Left and Right. In short, it is the France of political, economic and cultural centralization, and seems to have little to do with anything ecological.<sup>2</sup>

Much less familiar is *la France profonde* — “deep France” — which is the France of the provinces, and, more deeply still, of the regions. French regional thinking is expressed in the concept of *le pays*, which means literally “the country,” but also refers to the distinctive local region in which one lives. For the French it makes sense to speak of “my country” and to mean not the nation-state, but one’s own specific region — a usage almost unknown in the English-speaking world.<sup>3</sup>

Even the urbanized French often cling to their regional attachments. They are drawn to the surrounding countryside, its natural particularities, and its local traditions of architecture, cuisine, viticulture, and artisanship. Regionalists are concerned that this attachment should not decline into mere localized tourism and commercialism, that the remaining social and ecological integrity of regions should be fiercely defended, that the regions should be restored and reinvigorated, and that they should finally constitute a powerful challenge to the dominant industrialized and commercialized culture.

I will focus on Bernard Charbonneau, perhaps the most important figure in French regionalist thought (though his almost twenty books remain untranslated into English). Charbonneau (1910-1996) was a member of the personalist philosophical movement, a regionalist thinker and activist, and a critic of technology. Long before others began to speak of a “military-industrial complex,” he described a

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<sup>2</sup>Kerry Whiteside’s recent book *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002) makes a notable contribution by introducing Anglophone readers to a wide spectrum of French ecological social thought. It is one of the few works in English so far to devote any serious attention to French regionalism. See “Personalism and the State: Regionalist Ecologism.”

<sup>3</sup>There are some notable exceptions, such as the Alaska John McPhee describes in his classic *Coming into the Country* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), in which the “country” is the very particular one known by the indigenous people and other inhabitants.

looming social catastrophe produced by an alliance between capital, the state, and the technological system, in which the militarization of society was a crucial element. He looked upon the First World War as a crucial turning point in what he called “the Great Transformation” (*la Grande Mue*) of humanity. At the beginning of the last century William Graham Sumner wrote ironically of the Spanish-American War as “the conquest of the United States by Spain” — pointing out that in the process of defeating an empire, the United States succumbed to Empire by transforming itself into an imperial power. Similarly, for Charbonneau the most far-reaching implication of the First World War was its transformative effect on the societies involved, as new processes of social totalization engulfed them all.

Roland de Miller, one of Charbonneau’s admirers, points out that as early as 1937 Charbonneau identified the human feeling for nature as a revolutionary force that could challenge this expanding system of power. In 1949 he self-published an extensive work on the state, in which he compares the political totalitarianism of Stalinism to the developing technical and scientific totalization spreading throughout the world.<sup>4</sup> He also points to the horrifying incineration of Hiroshima as evidence of the major threat to our collective future in the limitless power of the military-industrial system. He did not neglect the ways in which this new totalitarian power was embodied no less in an all-encompassing economic system. According to de Miller, Charbonneau “never ceased denouncing in turn the dictatorship of the economic that is hidden in a mist of the social, the lies of technoscience, veiled by the infantile fantasies of omnipotence in the minds of unconscious consumers; and the straying of political ecology when it merely coats our commodities with a layer of green.”<sup>5</sup>

Charbonneau places in a more ecological and regionalist context the kind of critique of technological society for which his friend and colleague Jacques Ellul is so well known.<sup>6</sup> He describes the emergence of a process of social totalization in which certain social trends move forward and accelerate in a seemingly autonomous and inexorable

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<sup>4</sup>Reprinted as *L'État* (Paris: Éditions Économica, 1987).

<sup>5</sup>Roland de Miller, “Bernard Charbonneau (1910-1996): Biographie ” at <http://www.globalnet.org/demiller/charbon.html>.

<sup>6</sup>See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (NY: Knopf, 1967), and *The Technological System* (NY: Continuum, 1980). Certain parallels with Lewis Mumford’s critique of the Megamachine from a perspective of ecological regionalism are striking. See Mark Lucarelli, *Lewis Mumford and the Ecological Region* (NY: Guilford Publications, 1995).

manner. He shows that these trends include the economic rationality of capitalism, the bureaucratic rationality of the modern state, and the technological rationality of both. As a result of these tendencies, human power is “raised to a planetary level,” so that it takes on the task of “ruling an entire world, to its farthest reaches and to the depths of its complexity.” In the end, “the network of laws must cover every single inch of the surface of the globe,” and the world is subjected to “a totalitarian policing.”<sup>7</sup>

Charbonneau was particularly interested in the devastating effects of agro-industrial production on the land and people. He points out that not only does it pollute the countryside and deface the landscape, but it also destroys the freedom of the local inhabitants. Moreover, it annihilates diversity of all kinds, ranging from that of agricultural products, landscapes and ecological realities, on the one hand, to customs, tastes, cultures and communities, on the other.<sup>8</sup>

Charbonneau sees such devastation as part of a conflict between two conceptions of value and wealth. On one side is exchange value and the wealth associated with commodification, mass production, and manipulated needs. Somewhat in the spirit of the young Marx, he sees the most insidious evil of exchange value as its fundamental perversion of human experience. It dictates the dominion of the sign over “reality,” in the sense of those personal and natural realities of experience and of the senses that are effaced, obscured, repressed. Under its reign we can neither love nor enjoy that which we “value,” for we lack the contact with reality that both of these experiences require.<sup>9</sup>

On the other side is use value, and the wealth found in “the free goods provided by nature,” and “the personal goods that are beyond price.” “Use value” in this sense does not relate to “using” things, but rather to treating them as ends in themselves. They are “loved for what they are,” rather than merely “valued for what they are worth.” For Charbonneau, there is a mode of exchange between human beings and between humans and nature that is “a form of communion.” In such

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<sup>7</sup>Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), p. 32, quoted by Daniel Cérézuelle, “Wendell Berry et Bernard Charbonneau, critiques de l'industrialisation de l'agriculture” in *Encyclopédie de l'Agora* at [http://agora.qc.ca/ref/text.nsf/Documents/Agriculture/Wendell\\_Berry\\_et\\_Bernard\\_Charbonneau\\_critiques\\_de\\_par\\_Daniel\\_Cerezuelle](http://agora.qc.ca/ref/text.nsf/Documents/Agriculture/Wendell_Berry_et_Bernard_Charbonneau_critiques_de_par_Daniel_Cerezuelle).

<sup>8</sup>Bernard Charbonneau, *Il court, il court le fric...* (Bordeaux: Éditions Opales, 1996), p. 156.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

exchange, “another law of supply and demand comes into play through love.” With the reinstatement of such a system of values, “the market will retreat and once more reality will override the sign. Instead of trafficking in reality, we will learn how to enjoy it.”<sup>10</sup>

The return to the region is thus in large part a return to experience, to the senses, and to living realities. For Charbonneau, we participate in nature by embodying nature: “nature is my own sensing and active body, without which the mind would be only an abstract idea.”<sup>11</sup> Our relationship to nature is neither, as Western thought would have it, an essentially intellectual one, nor, as Western practice would have it, an instrumental one of mere use of objects for our ends. It is rather a dialectical relationship of interrelated being and reciprocal experiencing. We are ourselves embodied nature, we reach out to the rest of nature through perception, and our experience is a form of intimate contact with environing nature.<sup>12</sup>

The role of otherness in Charbonneau’s regionalist ontology and ethics is a central one. He believes that human beings are fully natural beings and at the same time beings who are distinct and differentiated from the rest of nature. Quite dialectically, he contends that we experience our distinctness as our freedom to shape reality, but we can only exercise our freedom to the degree to which it is embodied (or “incarnated”) through engagement with the world, including the natural world. Freedom thus depends on both an awareness of the otherness of nature and on a sensuous participation in nature.<sup>13</sup>

For Charbonneau, it is essential to recognize the otherness of nature and to refrain from projecting one’s own values and concepts of reality onto it. It retains this otherness “[w]hen I no longer personify it,

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert. Auto-critique du mouvement écologique* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1980), p. 55, quoted in Whiteside, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>12</sup>The regionalist emphasis on life, the body, the senses, and sensuous experience is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical phenomenology, which has recently begun to receive well-deserved attention in ecological philosophy. See David Abram’s landmark work, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1996).

<sup>13</sup>For a highly enlightening analysis of the crucial distinction between non-dualistic differentiation and dualistic splitting in our relationship to ourselves and to nature, see Joel Kovel, *History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), *passim*.

as the Ancients did, or like the Christians, identify it with a Providence that is supposed to satisfy our needs and our reason. Or again, like some naturalists, [endow] it with specifically human rational and moral qualities: such naturalism too is only a form of anthropocentrism. In order to know nature, it has to be distinguished from oneself: one must love it for its own sake.”<sup>14</sup>

This dimension of Charbonneau’s thought might be compared to the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, which is founded in a primordial perception of the other that precedes all instrumentalizing knowledge. But it has even stronger affinities with the feminist ethics of care, which emphasizes an openness and concern for a unique other that is valued for its own sake, and from which one is clearly differentiated. Ecologism sometimes proposes an ethical, spiritual, or even personal relationship with a nature that remains quite abstract and generic. But if we take a caring, engaged approach toward nature, we will dismiss any unqualified “unity” as a snare and a delusion. Just as a love of humanity, without an active concern for the human beings one encounters, risks becoming an empty abstraction, so a love of nature without an active engagement in one’s surrounding region results in a vacuous idealism — an illusory attainment of oneness with what in reality is a mere projection of one’s own ideas.

Charbonneau believes that the ecology movement on the whole has not grasped the nature of the present crisis, and has fallen into a self-defeating dualistic view of society and nature. In *Green Fire*, he discusses the ways in which a sharp division between an idealized “ecological” realm of wild nature and a supposedly denatured and fallen human realm can legitimate ecological destruction. “Ecologism,” he says, “is the ideology perfectly adapted for the few scientists and public servants in charge of managing the minute sector of ‘chemically pure nature’ from which human beings will be excluded — except for the certified naturalist” who is “acceptable in the industrial system for managing natural sanctuaries and national parks...”<sup>15</sup> In other words, there is room today for a growing green technocracy that will work within the prevailing order. In doing so it splits humanity off dualistically from the rest of nature while providing leisure-time opportunities for an imagined harmony and oneness with a supposedly

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<sup>14</sup>Charbonneau, *Le Feu Vert*, *op. cit.*, p. 65, quoted in Whiteside, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Daniel Cérézuelle, “Nature and Freedom: Introducing the Thought of Bernard Charbonneau,” unpublished manuscript, p. 23.

pristine nature.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the ecology movement presents no radically transformative vision of reversing the social and ecological degradation of the larger world.

Regionalism is itself sometimes criticized for promoting an escapist retreat from this larger world into the exclusiveness of a narrow localism. But this is far from the goal of its French advocates, who propose not only a more vivid experience of surrounding realities, but also a more authentic reaching out to others beyond one's own region. Max Rouquette, another important French regionalist,<sup>17</sup> says that the regional (*Occitan*) consciousness of southern France expresses "a voice that is quite specific, like that of each and every people, and which has no meaning, no *raison d'être*, except to the degree that it aspires to join in the universal song, in the chorus of all peoples."<sup>18</sup> The regionalist is in accord with the most famous of the personalist philosophers, Martin Buber, who says that the larger human community, the "organic commonwealth," can only exist if it is "a community of communities."<sup>19</sup> On a more practical level, Daniel Cérézuelle contends that a regionalist economics and agriculture produces not only greater self-sufficiency and a renewal of local ecological diversity, but also a greater complementarity between regions and localities. It will lead not only to an increased respect of each region for the autonomy and distinctiveness of the others, but also to a greater and more meaningful interdependence, as the undifferentiated, anonymous quality of the universal, abstract market is replaced by an economy founded on an appreciation of the uniqueness of locales and the distinctiveness of their bounty.<sup>20</sup>

It seems to me that if one follows the paths opened up by Charbonneau one can find a regionalism that is even more radical, critical and dialectical than the one he describes, and further dimensions

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<sup>16</sup>See David Nicholson-Lord's recent article on the ironies of eco-tourism, "Green Tragedy," in *Resurgence*, 212, May-June, 2002.

<sup>17</sup>Rouquette is the author of *Vert Paradis* (Toulouse: Institut d'estudis Occitans/Institut d'études Occitanes, 1961; 1974), a work written in Occitan, the traditional language of the Midi, and rooted deeply in the culture and landscape. It was translated into French as *Vert Paradis* (Paris: Editions Chemin Vert, 1980), and into English as *Green Paradise* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup>*Vert Paradis, op. cit.*, p. 301.

<sup>19</sup>Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 136.

<sup>20</sup>Daniel Cérézuelle, "Réflexions sur l'agriculture" at [http://agora.qc.ca/reftext.nsf/Documents/Agriculture/Reflexions\\_sur\\_lagriculture\\_par\\_Daniel\\_Cerezuelle](http://agora.qc.ca/reftext.nsf/Documents/Agriculture/Reflexions_sur_lagriculture_par_Daniel_Cerezuelle)

of regionality to be explored. However, his regionalism is of great significance for making two notable contributions to political ecology.

First, it points out very strikingly and concretely the horrifying destructiveness of an increasingly totalitarian system of economic, political and technological domination. We are now seeing its fulfillment in what is usually called “globalization” but which should more accurately be seen as corporate-state totalization. Charbonneau warns us that human society is undergoing a qualitative transformation under the domination of capital, the state and the technological system. He challenges us to consider whether forms of domination and instrumental rationality have infected society so pervasively that even the critics of the dominant system may seek no more than a better managed alienation from ourselves and nature.

Secondly, Charbonneau’s regionalism contributes to the development of a non-dogmatic, experientially materialist, rather than abstractly naturalist, social and political ecology. It recognizes that the system of domination increasingly constitutes an all-encompassing ethos and can only be opposed through a politics of experience rooted in our relationships with persons and places. It helps us comprehend that in opposing that system we are fighting not only for survival, but also for a deeply rewarding and joyful life for all, in which experience is liberated from the chains of domination, and the greatest wealth for the human being — the other human being *and* the other beings in nature — is rediscovered.