

Peter Dauvergne

Environmentalism of the Rich

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Peter Dauvergne's *Environmentalism of the Rich* forces readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that mainstream environmentalism is perpetuating a cycle of unsustainable development. The environmentalism of the 1970s – a countermovement that challenged the status quo – has been watered down to a point where business as usual is legitimised and calls to re-examine the basic structures and purpose of the economy are increasingly muted. The environmentalism of the rich, with origins in the West, is spreading around the world and reinforcing unequal social and ecological patterns that first emerged under colonialism. This form of environmentalism abides by a politics of more – more consumption and more growth – making it utterly incapable of meeting the ‘transformative ecological and justice-oriented goals’ (p. 9) called for in the twenty-first century.

Like Joan Martinez-Alier's well-known thesis, *Environmentalism of the Poor* (2002), Dauvergne makes an important addition to the literature critiquing the contemporary environmental movement. A core aspect of his contribution lies in his portrayal of the fluidity and dynamism of environmental movements – they are not easily categorised along geographic or class lines. For instance, he explains how the environmentalism of the poor has found fertile ground in rich countries where activists fight against the injustices of environmental racism. In contrast, those who are poor and living in poor nations can also be seen supporting the environmentalism of the rich in the hopes that they too will eventually become rich.

Dauvergne predicts that the environmentalism of the rich is likely to deepen in the coming decades, and the first step in challenging it is to understand it. This book is therefore an essential read for anyone who is frustrated with the limited progress that has been made globally in solving environmental issues and wants to know why this has come to be. Throughout the book, Dauvergne offers examples of how solutions proposed under the guise of ‘corporate social responsibility’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘eco-consumption’ consistently fail to address our ecological crisis in any meaningful way. In fact he sees these optimistic business messages as ‘pulling increasing numbers of middleclass consumers into the orbit of environmentalism of the rich’ (p. 71). By shining a light on the inherent deficiencies of these approaches, readers are urged to think critically about the type of

environmentalism that is necessary to build a sustainable future and consider their role in the process.

It is worth noting that this book does not offer a blueprint for a sustainable future, opening up the potential for critique. But the stated purpose of the book is to make the case for a renewed radicalism in fighting for social and ecological change. In this regard, Dauvergne has clearly accomplished his goal. And despite the absence of solutions about what a more impassioned environmentalism should look like or how actual progress on sustainability might be achieved, Dauvergne skilfully manages to impart an empowering message. He does so by emphasising the critical role of people in engendering change.

Analyses of how markets and politics interact to shape social and environmental outcomes tend to overlook the obvious fact that these institutions are made of and maintained by people. Refreshingly, Dauvergne points out how overlooking the centrality of people in building a sustainable future runs the risk of diverting accountability away from the people who make up and run the capitalist system to vague concepts like capitalism itself (p. 149). Readers are urged to ponder the question, ‘Is no one responsible for overconsumption, wasteful consumption, and intensifying ecological footprints?’ (p. 53).

In an effort to reignite a spark of outrage, Dauvergne illustrates the depth and breadth of today’s socio-ecological crises by drawing on theories from ecological and green economics, postcolonialism, and political economy. He also offers a diversity of case studies to portray the pervasiveness and insidious consequences of the environmentalism of the rich. These include amongst others: the colonisation of New Hebrides (modern day Vanuatu), which illuminates how unsustainability has reproduced over generations starting with colonialism; the rise in popularity of Pampers in China, highlighting the questionable motives behind global brand sustainability; and Greenpeace’s ‘mindbombing’ tactics, which showcase the futility of encouraging minor reforms in industry practices within a consumer culture.

In accordance with his view that individuals do matter to sustainability outcomes, Dauvergne zeroes in on personalities who have been important in both furthering unsustainability as well as those who have worked tirelessly to defend the natural world. The stories of seventeenth-century colonial explorer captain Queiros and the ecologically reckless chemist Thomas Midgley serve as cautionary tales of how people can make socially and environmentally damaging choices in the name of ‘progress.’ Dauvergne also writes about sustainability champions such as the unconventional Swiss activist, Bruno Manser, who fought to conserve the old-growth forests and indigenous way of life in Borneo, whistleblowers Rachel Carson and Wangari Maathai, as well as mavericks like Adbusters’

Kalle Lasn. This emphasis on people proves to be a useful device for shedding light on the motivating factors behind individual actions that, when added up, have profound consequences. It also accentuates the historical roots of the environmentalism of the rich and how patterns established long ago still influence individual choices today.

Dauvergne does not fall into a trap of oversimplifying the people or organisations in his book into black and white categories. Indeed, the strength of his storytelling lies in his capacity for communicating nuance. Aware of the complexities inherent in living sustainably Dauvergne also discusses his own messy and often hypocritical existence. By acknowledging his privilege and how he undoubtedly perpetuates unsustainability while also fighting against it, he invites readers to reflect on their own place in the world and their responsibility to fight for change.

Reference

Martinez-Alier, J. (2002) *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Conflicts and Valuation* (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham).

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