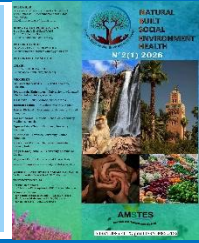




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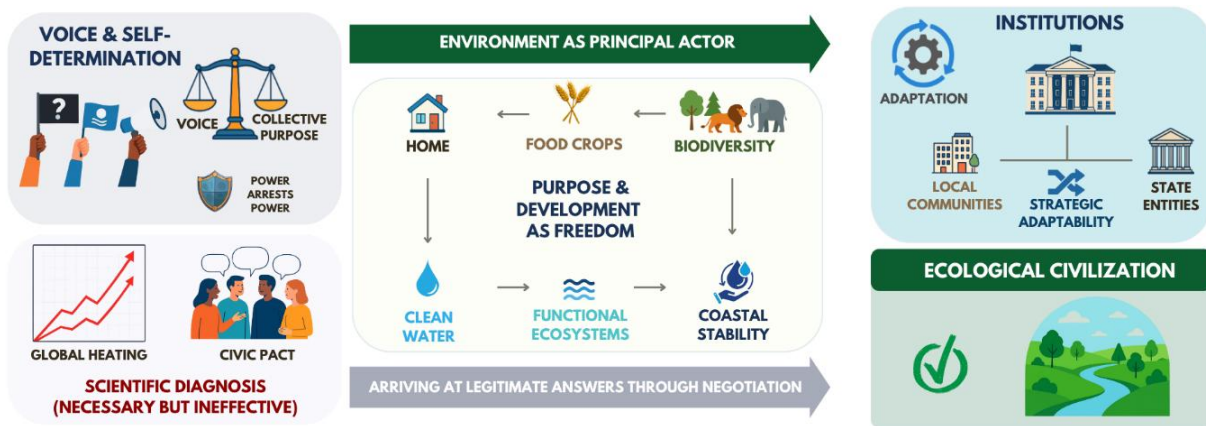
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BOOK REVIEW



The Environmental Republic. Why citizens will save the world, by Giulio Boccaletti, Princeton University Press, 259p, £25. ISBN 978-0-691 26200-0 hbk, 28791-3 epub, 26201 pdf



Science is often invoked to justify environmental action. Surely, science illumines environmental problems; but it does not define them and, as Hume noted some time ago [1], the scientifically diagnosed state of nature does not tell us what we *ought* to do. Scientific diagnosis of global heating has been accurate – but ineffective. All of us with skin in the game believed that demonstration of the facts would ensure wise management, and threw ourselves into painting a picture of the future compelling enough to convince everyone not to go there. Yet, we are hurtling towards the very future we tried so hard to avoid and the pace of change is outstripping evolution.

We should not be surprised. Commentators greatly overstate the authority of science in guiding us through fundamentally political choices and most of the world sees things differently. Most of the world is not wrong: neither is the science but the perspectives of science and everyman are different.

Societies arrive at legitimate decisions by negotiation: seeking a viable synthesis in spite of passionate disagreements – not to overcome them. The question that matters most is: What do we want our future to be? No one has a monopoly on the answer: dons may disagree with displaced coal miners, the answers of the 5 or 6 billion people who will be living in the Global South in 2050 are likely to be different from the billion who will be living in rich countries.

Giulio Boccaletti has participated in these negotiations as a scientist. On every page, you will find wisdom drawn from that experience but the world he describes – and our relationships with it – are a lot more complicated than the stories of Antonio Gramsci that set him on his way. Rather than proffering answers, he seeks a political framework for arriving at *legitimate* answers, which he calls *The Environmental Republic*. It is not Plato's *Republic* [2] although the goal is the same; its citizens are not dominated by the state or anyone else, everyone having a voice that is heard and acted upon by *institutions*, such as the law, with a *purpose*. But in our century, the environment is not merely the stage for action; it is the principal actor. Like Plato, our author builds his argument stage by stage, which demands some tenacity of his readers; not merely perseverance but strategic adaptability and imagination.

To be free deals with voice. Barbados is presented as a case study in self-determination: settled by a few dozen British colonists and their slaves in 1625, their voice raised through eventual emancipation, transition to self-government under the crown and, finally, a republic in 2021. Voice is the opportunity to balance individual liberty – of what we are free to do, be and think – with the pursuit of collective purpose, perhaps wrestling with the coercive power of the state. If a republic means anything, its citizens are ruled according to laws that they have themselves consented to, conceived by and for themselves. The republic is about who has the power: the citizen, not the law, is a check on the power of the state: 'Only power arrests power' [3] although this has not always been the case in the 159 sovereign states that currently style themselves as republics.

Ruling the waves notes the limitations of voice across the oceans. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that lays down what we can and cannot do there was born out of the complex mix of postcolonial independence, Cold War politics, and technology. Its enforcement depends on naval powers of coercion; and oceanic protected areas have had remarkably little effect – the Great Barrier Reef, a Marine Park since 1975, is a striking example.

Fruits of the cyclone (that is to say, the eye of the storm, and introduced by flooding of our author's childhood home in Emilia-Romagna in 2024) focuses on institutions that have evolved to manage the environment. Over centuries, local and national institutions evolved to serve the social and physical infrastructures that insulate us from storms, floods and droughts; but the climate in which our societies and infrastructure evolved no longer exists. Neither structure is any longer fit for purpose – particularly for dealing with global issues.

The nature of nature, assesses the third building block of the environmental republic – its *purpose*. It turns out that the nature that most people have in mind and are prepared to pay for is not actually a property of the environment. It is relative to our desires: a mix of fantasy, functionality and social

values. What we mean by nature is *us*: the nature of society, which is not the same thing as Earth's carbon, water and nutrient cycles.

Everything in the environment has both function and place: we expect our environment to produce food, host biodiversity, support our infrastructure, be our home – safe from the destructive power of wind and water, *e.g.*, we want our coastline to be stable so we can build those beachfront properties and not watch them wash away. Whatever purpose we decide to give our republic, it ought to help us sort through all those expectations and make consistent, enduring choices.

Emergent voices. The idea of home is anchored in where we live but distance dims the detail. This disconnect makes it hard to voice when the environment is a matter of global commons: the ocean, the atmosphere. Somehow, voice must bring place with it – reflect its part in our life – which requires constitutional arrangements. Pastoral nomads could express their voice over great distances by movement, back and forth. In sedentary societies, democracies incorporate geography by dividing suffrage into constituencies and this is repeated in local government and civil society organizations. But the rules-based international architecture, that represented our collective interests since the Second World War, is being dismantled; human rights are deteriorating across the world; global public health has not recovered from the COVID pandemic ... We are not doing well but, in the long view, managing our home together has been the big challenge of human history and an engaged community has always been its main protagonist – and only answer.

The rules of engagement have to balance the rights of the individual with collective purpose. In common law countries, legislators are *representatives* of their constituents: voice protecting the individual from coercion by the state. By contrast, under civil or Roman law, legislators are *deputies*, imposing the collective purpose; private interests always yield when the republic speaks by its law. Negotiating private interests is complicated because individuals have different experiences of the same reality over large scales. Negotiating common purpose generally relies on a geographic division of power in areas or regions of the political community.

Republican institutions tackles their role in linking people and place, in particular when action is needed beyond a local scale, where strategic adaptability may need to challenge some long-held ideas about property rights and the role of the state.

Rousseau reckoned: 'The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying "This is mine" and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society' [4]. Much earlier, Cicero argued: 'the chief preoccupation of the state-administrator must be to ensure that the individual keeps what is his [5].' Private property has been thought of as a marker of liberty ever since. No less fundamentally, Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' [6], more

recently wedded to individual responsibility [7] has been credited with an efficacy that can never be delivered by purposeful collective action.

Balancing private and public ownership of the bundle of rights associated with land is a crucial issue. In a world where most of the environment is in private ownership and that ownership is considered inseparable from self-determination, the state, representing collective action, needs to intervene in issues beyond the local scale. Our author advances two ways of doing this. One: the corporation-like public entity, *e.g.*, F.D. Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority, a technocracy subordinated to the oversight of the people living in the catchment. Another: a national health service that relies on a common knowledge of what health is; a robust epidemiology – a causal theory of things that bring about public health outcomes, be they viruses or medicines; and a trusted system of responsibilities, for instance that a community has the right to protect itself against an epidemic. In these dimensions, environmental science has a lot of ground to make up.

Purpose as development: What, then, is the purpose of Boccaletti's proposed republic? Most people will settle for development: [8] but that demands growth. Mrs Bruntland's *sustainable development* [8] was an earlier attempt to square the circle. Our author considers the astounding modern development of China and the fate of assorted post-colonial republics to argue that, hidden in the problems of growth and its impact on the environment is a failure of political enrolment: systems incapable of corralling disparate voices to pursue a common purpose – without which, regime survival trumps any other concern.

Autocratic China, while lifting half a billion people out of abject poverty and becoming the undisputed leader in renewable energy and electric vehicles, and anyone's equal in science and engineering, has made the environment a central part of its constitution. It declares itself an *ecological civilization*. At the same time, it is the fastest builder of coal-fired power plants and the world leader in emissions. And what of the three quarters of mankind inhabiting the Global South by 2050? Planetary boundaries and lack of capital constrain consumption at the levels of consumption enjoyed by rich countries.

Our author denies biophysical constraints and focuses instead on legitimacy – liberty in the sense of self-determination in a place we call home [9] and the conditions that we might create there if we choose the quality of development rather gross consumption, as advocated by The *World Inequality Report 2026* [10] although the environmental failures that threaten our future, that destroy ecosystems, are not the product of economic inequality. Inequality is simply another failure with the same underlying cause: inability to ensure that people are the authors of their own lives and communities.

We, the people: Whom we mean by *we* matters. Our author's *we* is Europe and he springs it upon us as his proto-environmental republic. There is the unfinished business of European integration, the first step of which, in 1949, was a river basin authority along the lines of the Tennessee Valley Authority to govern the industrial production of the Ruhr. In view of the dismemberment of the global liberal order, there is a lot hanging on European integration.

At present, what holds Europe together are the four freedoms of movement in its single market: goods, services, labour and capital. A political purpose feels distant from the concerns of everyman but it need not be. Environment could be the missing link: 'If environmental phenomena become first-order preoccupations, as they are bound to, institutions will need to shift from the primacy of cultural affinity to that of environmental function' – that is to say, a green and pleasant land. Net primary productivity is no bad proxy for the health of the environment and it is worth a thought that, although most of the miniscule EU federal budget has been spent on an unashamedly social Common Agricultural Policy, satellite measurements of net primary productivity since 1981 [11] show that, considered as a single country, the European Union leads the world with a gain of 300MtC over 41 years¹, with no member state returning a loss.

Epilogue: Our author began with a personal reflection on the failure of scientific diagnosis to propel sustained environmental action. Returning to this theme, he concludes that reliance on science is a dereliction of political responsibility and delegation to a bureaucracy too fragile to withstand demagogues and tribalism. Far from sharing Plato's enthusiasm for philosopher kings, particularly the self-appointed variety, he argues for a civic pact through which people legitimately manage their geography and their lives together by negotiation: talking with each other, face-to-face and free from domination.

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¹ China achieved 286Mt, twice the gain of the next best.

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