

12 QUESTIONS TO MARCO ARMIERO

1. From your point of view, what are today's most pressing environmental problems?

All available scientific evidence is unequivocally pointing towards climate change and the imminent disruption of Earth's life cycles. The rapid extinction of species is occurring at an alarming rate. However, it's important to recognize that these are the consequences of fundamental structural issues. In my 2021 volume *Wasteocene*, I stressed the need to go beyond the reification of environmental problems because solving "the thing" will not address the socioecological relationships producing "the thing" in the first place. I would dare to say that the most pressing environmental problem we are facing is capitalism and its production of global dumps for the "others" and illusory paradises for "us". I am not implying that other economic regimes had better impacts on our ecologies; I am just stating the obvious: that capitalism with its paraphernalia of deep inequalities and market illusionism is today's biggest challenge we are facing.

2. When looking at potential improvements in our environment, what gives you hope?

My hope derives from the social movements that have mobilized for climate justice in recent years. While research and innovations are undoubtedly necessary to assist us in mitigating and adapting to climate change, it is crucial to understand that without social mobilization, we will not achieve the profound transformation that is required.

3. Is there a particular environmental policy reform you admire the most?

The 1980 *Superfund* is a remarkable piece of U.S. legislation designed to address contamination in vulnerable communities. It is complemented by the 1994 *Executive Order 12898*, issued by President Clinton, which focuses on addressing environmental injustices. Both of these policies emerged as a result of grassroots movements. Additionally, the 2010 Bolivian *Law on the Rights of Mother Earth* stands out as a significant milestone in environmental policy. It signifies a profound departure from our previous anthropocentric approach to defining rights.

4. Which trend in environmental policy and politics do you consider an aberration?

I am critical of carbon markets, as they are not only inefficient but also unjust. Some aspects of the rhetoric surrounding the ecological transition also raise concerns for me. For instance, the uncritical celebration of electric cars often overlooks the ecological and social costs associated with this technological shift, especially in the countries where extraction is occurring.

5. Why environmental communication and campaigning?

Knowledge is power, and disseminating knowledge can serve as an initial step toward organization. However, as much as I value the power of knowledge, I refuse to echo the naive refrain: "if only people would know...". Knowing that a factory is causing illness will not liberate a worker from the job blackmail. Grasping the connection between automobiles and fossil fuels will not provide an alternative to individual transportation or more affordable housing in urban centers. To adapt a poignant motto, I would like to say that we need knowledge and bread too.

6. What has your experience been when it comes to transferring scientific insights into practice?

I envision the relationship between researchers and civil society as a mutual exchange. Researchers such as myself owe a significant debt to activists' knowledge. I could mention the concept of biocide developed by Italian activists or their practice of intersectionality, both of which have had a profound influence on my work. Conversely, I believe that I have played a crucial role in introducing the concept of "environmental justice" to certain activist circles, and in connecting movements focused on toxicity with the broader climate mobilization effort.

7. What field of research in the environmental sciences do you find most exciting?

Epigenetics is truly intriguing because it provides a window into how environmental and social factors can impact individuals' health, taking into account disparities related to social class, gender, and race. Put simply, epigenetics delves into the intricate interplay between genetics and the environment, and it has been applied in research examining unequal exposure to hazards.

8. Can you name any person or event that has had a particular influence on your commitment to environmental issues?

I became involved with environmental issues during my PhD studies when I realized that the field of environmental history was one of the few academic disciplines still offering a radical critique of capitalism. Moreover, in the early 1990s, being an environmental historian in Italy was, in itself, an act of disobedience – precisely what I was seeking. In this context, Donald Worster, a fellow environmental historian, exerted a profound influence on me. His book *Dust Bowl* on the socioecological failures of U.S. capitalism in the 1930s, was particularly impactful. Later on, I discovered other figures, such as the Italian journalist Tina Merlin who in vain anticipated the 1963 Vajont dam disaster that killed 2000 people. Or the Brazilian union leader Chico Mendez who was killed because his idea to protect people and the forest together clashed with the interests of large landowners.

9. What knowledge about the environment would you like to pass on to young people?

That the environment is not a neutral arena where science can make everyone agree. The environment is political and needs people who are willing to make choices. With whom do you wish to align?

10. As a person concerned with environmental and especially climate communication, what contradictions do you face in everyday life?

In my job, I am evaluated on criteria that frequently reproduce patterns of oppression and marginalization. Striving to survive in an often hostile environment, I am compelled to choose my battles wisely, which sometimes leads me to make compromises, such as publishing behind a paywall. At times, I must establish my boundaries, even if it comes at a personal cost.

11. What are you reading at the moment?

I have just finished an older book from 1995 titled *Shadows of a tender fury. The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army*. I am deeply fascinated by the Zapatistas' capacity to transform politics into powerful narratives with the simplicity and sharpness that I could never achieve. And a good dose of humor that doesn't hurt.

12. Apart from the ones we've raised here, what is the most important question of our day?

War, with the looming threat of a nuclear apocalypse, and the death of countless migrants are two immense tragedies unfolding right before our distracted eyes. Against the preachers of hate and fear, we need a mobilization of love and solidarity. Some might argue that it's insufficient, but the worst that might happen is to become more humane. To me, this seems a risk worth taking.



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Publications (selected): *Wasteocene: Stories from the global dump* (2021); has been translated/is under translation into Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Bosnian, Chinese) | *Mussolini's Nature* (2022, with Roberta Biasillo and Wilko Graf von Hardenberg) | *La tragedia del Vajont* (2023).

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MARCO ARMIERO ...

... is ICREA Research Professor at the Institute for the History of Science at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, ES. For the last four years, he has served as President of the European Society for Environmental History. And while those posts certainly reflect his stature as a highly respected leader in environmental history, he is renowned for pursuing transdisciplinary research that productively links that field with political ecology and the environmental humanities.

I first met Armiero at a workshop on *Environmental Conflicts and Justice* at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in 2012, where I was immediately drawn to his passion for critical and challenging scholarly work, his liveliness in the way he shares and receives ideas, and his self-effacing humor. From that moment onward, I have delighted in reading his superb and prolific writings, all of which feature a unique and refreshing mixture of urgency and playfulness. One of his many colleagues and former mentees, Elisa Privitera, recently described Armiero as “an undisciplined, humble and hard-working revolutionary scholar” who brings a “deep humility” to his craft, which is ultimately aimed at advancing knowledge and practice in order to address “existing inequalities and the achievement of a more just society” (personal communication). I could not agree more! By “undisciplined,” of course, Privitera means that Armiero is deeply committed to scholarship that is not bound by traditional disciplinary norms or borders, and is, instead, vehemently supportive of integrating knowledge and practice across areas of inquiry and embracing collaborations that traverse the university-community divide.

Armiero's scholarship engages with three exciting and interrelated topics: environmental justice, migrations and the environment, as well as fascism and nature, with an emphasis on the ways that dominant institutions and their managers perpetrate expropriations on multispecies communities and on how those same communities creatively resist such practices. He is one of the founders of the field of environmental history in Italy, and co-authored (with Stefania Barca) the first text book on the subject, titled *Storia dell'ambiente. Una introduzione*, in 2004. He is a senior editor of the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism* and is the Editor-in-chief of the journal *Resistance: A Journal of Radical Environmental Humanities* (in transition, formerly *Resilience: A Journal of Environmental Humanities*).

One of Armiero's most important intellectual contributions is the Wasteocene, a term he uses to advance the debates around the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene in which he argues that the present epoch is marked by wasting relationships rooted in invidious inequalities, extraction, othering, and violence (see his recent book, *Wasteocene: Stories from the global dump*). I find that this concept powerfully extends and deepens my own understanding of environmental justice politics because it places such struggles in a broader historical context and offers a path toward justice and transformation through its focus on resistance among marginalized populations. Above all, Marco Armiero is a consummate producer of mind-expanding ideas that rise to the occasion and offer us the kinds of tools and insights that are desperately needed in this time of local and global socioecological crises.

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