

Interview with
Jean-Claude Monod

The Art of Not Being Too Governed

[L'art de ne pas être trop gouverné]

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Jean-Claude Monod, L'art de ne pas être trop gouverné
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Your book comes at a time when the reappraisal of work is becoming unavoidable. What was your starting point?

My starting point was a common thread. On the one hand, there was Michel Foucault's work in the late 1970s on what he called a "crisis of governmentality" affecting Western societies. On the other was the current climate of frequent revolts and contestation, such as the yellow vests in France, or the ecological movements. These events closely match Foucault's analysis: an abuse, a given legal decision or power relationship is called into question, and ends up calling into question an entire system of government. The uprisings from Chili to Lebanon that were dubbed – not long after the book's release – a "global uprising", share a common sentiment: that democracy has been confiscated or suppressed, or (in the case of representative democracy) is insufficient or distorted despite being necessary, and of a social and political dispossession thought to be vehicled in part by neoliberalism. The early signs of this global uprising inspired me to revisit Foucault's interpretation of a power constantly redefining its relationship with the governed, as well as the emergence of neoliberalism in another context of crisis.

What was your writing process?

I was in constant dialogue with earlier studies of Foucault's work on governmentality, with historic examples of crisis like the Reformation, and analyses of current affairs. I was particularly interested in what I take to be a "crisis of the neoliberal state" and in increasing demands for a more balanced relationship with the world than the current state of environmental destruction – which I describe as the "usufruct of earth". I was constantly trying to weave together these two threads.

Working in the social sciences also means participating in debates in which your role as a researcher is to challenge prejudice. What is a major misconception that you would like to see challenged?

I try to demonstrate that the necessary criticism of an increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism, which exacerbates inequalities, shouldn't entail the wholesale indictment of liberalism in all its forms, especially legal and political liberalism. In this regard I part ways with Foucault (and a whole side of contemporary social critique) and take inspiration from John Dewey. He considered the successful delineation of the prerogatives of political and state power to be a victory of the 18th century and of liberal thinkers, but that the economic domination and pressure exerted on the state and its laws by big business should equally be called into question.