

Interview with
Pierre Charbonnier

Freedom and plenty : An Environmental History of Political Thought

[Liberté et abondance : une histoire
environnementale des idées politiques]

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*Pierre Charbonnier, Abondance et liberté : une histoire
environnementale des idées politiques
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Your book comes at a time when the reappraisal of work is becoming unavoidable. What was your starting point?

The very concept of economic growth only recently appeared in academic discourse, in the mid-20th century, but its conceptual roots appear to go back earlier. And it is a project that ties the improvement of a political future with the improvement of a material future. As early as the 17th century, it was thought that pushing back the limits of the earth and the environment through technique, science and conquest, was not both a basic precept of modern law, and a chance to improve the material conditions of human existence. In *Abondance et liberté* I wanted to show that there is an ecological aspect to sovereignty in the early modern era, inextricable from its better-known political aspect. We have come to a point where the climate emergency has put us in a deadlock: associating freedom with this form of plenty was an extremely efficient, but short-sighted choice.

What was your writing process?

We are living in a time when the sciences in general, and the humanities in particular, are being seriously called into question, and this is reflected in the erosion of staff and budgets. It's important to remember then that it would have been impossible to write a book like this without the institutional support of universities and research teams, libraries, and formal and informal peer networks: this is where knowledge is made. To

gather source material, analyse it, hold it up to contemporary debate, and present a book to the public at the end of all that, you need time, and you need to be free from the constraints of short-term priorities.

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?

Social critique is about dismantling ideas that the past has imposed on us as self-evident. In some ways, we are held captive by some very deep-seated confusions, and not least those tied to our ecological dependency. For example, a number of debates pit two opposing sides: the idea that endless accumulation and predation are inevitable, and the prospect of an impending general collapse, if not the end of the world. But it is our past that has led us to these false alternatives: we have become entirely incapable of building a vision of collective emancipation that does not lead to ecological disaster, with the extinction of our species as the only viable alternative – and this is an impasse in itself. And yet, social movements have already provided us with innovative political and economic alternatives that we would do well to consider and put forward.