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Freedom by Another Name: On Bernard Charbonneau

Article by Patrick Chastenet
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Long before ecology entered the political mainstream, Bernard Charbonneau was already diagnosing a central paradox of the modern age: that the more we master nature, the less we can experience freedom. Nothing illustrates this better than mass tourism: born from an authentic desire to escape the city, it ends up dragging the city's crowds, concrete, and regulations wherever it goes.

"We cannot pursue infinite development in a finite world."[1] Bernard Charbonneau (1910–1996) undoubtedly had a way with words. Sadly, this did not secure him his rightful place in history as one of the most singular and appealing thinkers of the twentieth century. A few people do still mention him, often in the same breath as Jacques Ellul, but they often erroneously think the lives and ideas of these two Bordeaux thinkers are interchangeable.

Admittedly, from an early espousal of personalism to the fight to preserve the Aquitaine coast, they shared many dreams and fought for many of the same causes. There is more that unites them than divides them. But Charbonneau's work was not only more literary, but also more philosophical, more applied, and most of all more directly engaged with ecological issues than Ellul's. The latter said that his friend Charbonneau "taught me how to think and how to be a free spirit".[2]

When, at the 2002 Johannesburg summit, Jacques Chirac spoke the now-famous words "our house is burning down and we're blind to it", readers of Charbonneau heard an echo of a remark made first in 1977 in the pages of *Foi & Vie* – "forced to think in a house that has caught on fire", and again in 1980 in *The Green Light*: "Our paradox is that of having to hurry slowly, being commanded to reflect in a house that is on fire."[3]

In terms of realising the urgency of ecological issues, Charbonneau was a pioneer. But to merely stress how early his warnings were, or the foresight of his analysis of how techno-industrial society destroys nature while also fuelling a need for it, is to overlook other important contributions. Even if we limit ourselves to the ecological aspects of his work, his singular approach meant he was not only a precursor to, but also an actor in and critical observer of a movement transformed by the pursuit of "changing politics".

Bernard Charbonneau thought philosophically about his life and lived out his philosophy. Fully. Intensely. What made him such a major pioneer of degrowth and political ecology in twentieth-century France?





Bernard Charbonneau. Image by D.L.C. via Wikimedia Commons

A pioneer

His awareness of these issues did not come from books. “I saw car culture arrive in my own street,” he explained in an interview.[4] Growing up in Bordeaux, he was a rebel who was constantly trying to get out of the city by any means possible, on foot, at the height of the scouting movement, by train, or with small groups of friends as a sixth-former and student. He would pitch his tent in the middle of the countryside, in the forests and mountains on both sides of the Pyrenees, and fish with his bare hands in rivers and lakes.

From a young age, he was convinced that freedom could only be experienced in direct contact with nature. His understanding of freedom was an applied one, and his love of nature was physical. He felt he was watching what he called a “Great Metamorphosis”, a profound transformation in human beings caused by the acceleration of science and technology. He believed that the First World War, which he referred to as the first “total war” in history, played a significant role in this process.

At the start of the 1930s, he rejected both the liberal figure of the detached individual and the role of political soldier glorified by totalitarian countries. Instead, he sought an anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, anti-Stalinist movement. He travelled to Paris in 1933 to meet Emmanuel Mounier and to affiliate his small discussion group with the *Esprit* movement. It was in that personalist journal that his first feature article appeared, entitled “La publicité” (“Advertising”).[5] He remarked that “advertising has

swamped everything, our newspapers, our roads, no-one notices it anymore, but we need to deconstruct it." It is "assisted by the invention of means of persuasion that can make lies more real than reality." A creator of artificial needs, it goes unseen because it is ubiquitous: "Anyone who could clip the wings of advertising would make a hundred times as deep a change to our civilisation as any political initiative could achieve."

In 1935, he and Jacques Ellul wrote the first Western proposal to voluntarily limit growth in the twentieth century: "Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste".[6] This text made the Bordeaux group the figurehead of the most libertarian, Girondist, regionalist, federalist strand of the personalist movement, and most significantly that which was most focused on ecology and degrowth (*avant la lettre*). "We are revolutionaries in spite of ourselves," explained the authors. A searing indictment of the productivism of industrial civilisation and the power of money, the manifesto critiqued giantism, the way modern technology tends to concentrate capital, populations and the state. It railed against widespread proletarianisation: "Once man consents to no longer being the measure of his world, he relinquishes the very possibility of moderation."

The manifesto advocated in favour of elective communities rather than large cities, small voluntary groupings that were rooted in a particular place, a city on a human scale, politics founded on direct, transparent communication between the governors and the governed, and countries divided into regions with a pared-back central state. It also argued for bottom-up federalism to coordinate these autonomous units, reorienting technology to fulfil the most arduous tasks, reducing working hours, providing a universal basic income, banning the charging of interest on loans, regulating advertising, and a property system focused on the effective enjoyment of goods. Both poverty and wealth needed to be tackled, as "people are dying of a desperate desire for the enjoyment of material things, and others of not having access to those things." The themes of the dual society that blossomed forty years later with André Gorz and Serge Moscovici are already visible here, even if expressed in a different way.

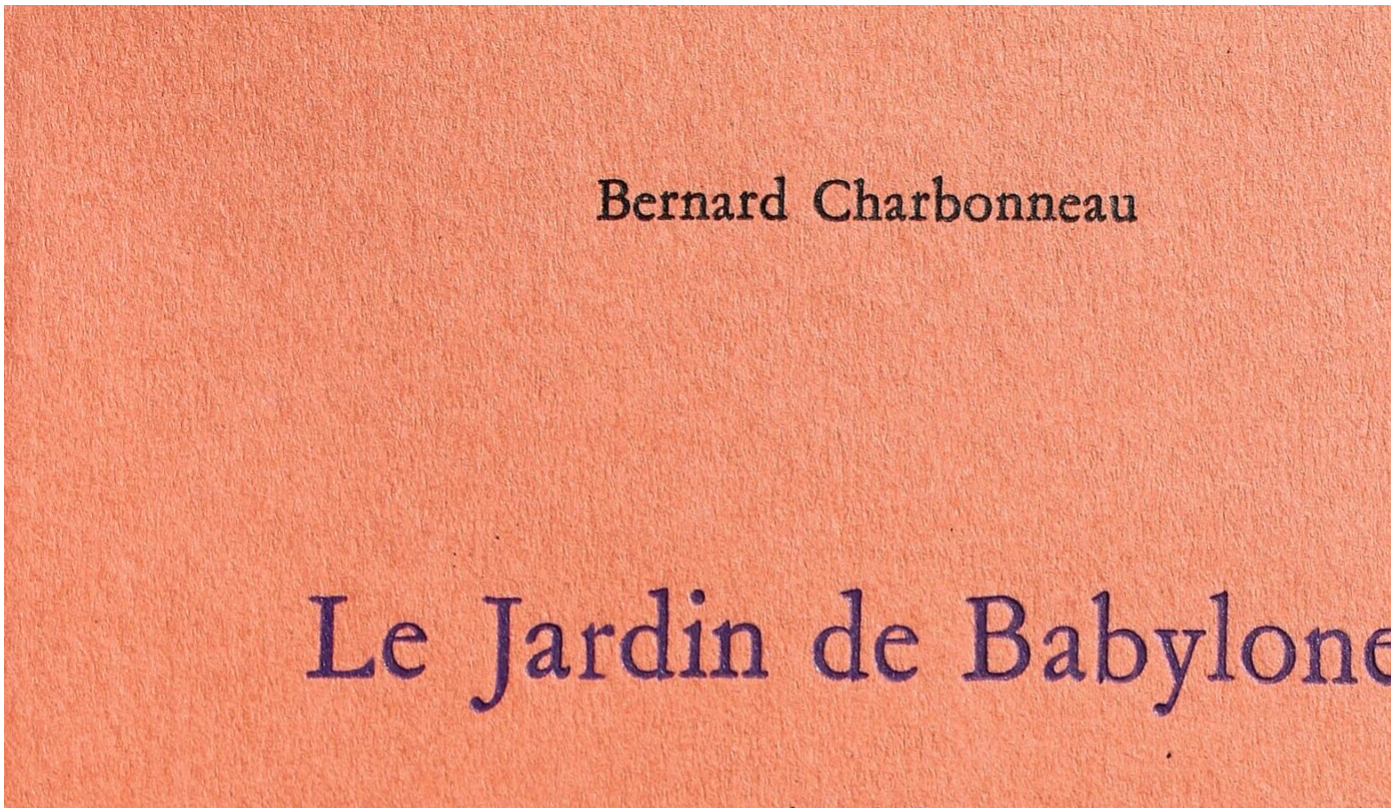
In *Le sentiment de la nature, force révolutionnaire* (1937),[7] Charbonneau expanded on the manifesto's degrowth theme and systematised his thoughts on the relationship between humans and their environment. This text made him France's foremost twentieth-century theoretician of political ecology. Following the anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus, with whose thought he was closely aligned, but whom he never quoted, he remarked that "we don't need a Sunday in the countryside, we need a less artificial life." His key message here was that modern technology makes us more comfortable, but removes the joy of simple pleasures, and that what we gain in safety and security we lose in liberty. "Feeling for nature" should be to personalism what class consciousness had been to socialism: reason made flesh.

Charbonneau made sacrifices in order to live ever further from urban centres. A teacher of history and geography in Bourges, Biarritz, Bordeaux and Pau, he successfully applied for a transfer to Lescar in 1945, and went to work in a small teacher training college. Living in almost complete mental and intellectual solitude, he threw himself into writing a manuscript of over a thousand closely written pages, entitled *Par la force des choses*, which contained the kernel of fifteen of his books.

The work analysed the contradictions of industrial civilisation, anticipating the risk of "social totalisation", which would be worse than political totalitarianism, caused by the acceleration of technological progress. It showed how industrial society destroyed nature, while fuelling a feeling of desire for it. It criticised the "exponential development" of advertising and propaganda in daily life, and anticipated the liquidation of peasant agriculture, the destruction of the countryside and of landscapes, the increasing ugliness of cities and suburbs, and the bureaucratisation of existence, subject to an administrative apparatus that restricts the capacity to feel freedom.

In order to publish "the hulk", as he nicknamed it, Charbonneau had to break it down into sections, which were then circulated among a very limited readership. In 1946, he resumed his nature discussion camps, where he used the ideas of Georges Bernanos and Aldous Huxley to think about the post-Hiroshima world. His ecologist, libertarian discourse still went unheard outside of his circle of admirers. He had to pay to publish his books, except for a few titles such as *Dimanche et Lundi* (1966) and *L'Hommauto* (1967).

His masterwork, *Le Jardin de Babylone* (Gallimard, 1969), was published at the moment that the environmental movement picked up pace, with the creation of France Nature Environnement in 1968 and Friends of the Earth in 1969. Ecology finally had the green light. Charbonneau was active on all its fronts, despite being in the early years of his retirement, which he would have preferred to spend indulging his passion for trout fishing. He was involved in the Soussouéou defence committee, which succeeded in preventing the construction of a high-altitude ski resort; he protested against the development of a tourist destination in a Basque Country forest; and he campaigned in Soule alongside the Association au service des agriculteurs montagnards (Mountain Farmers' Association).



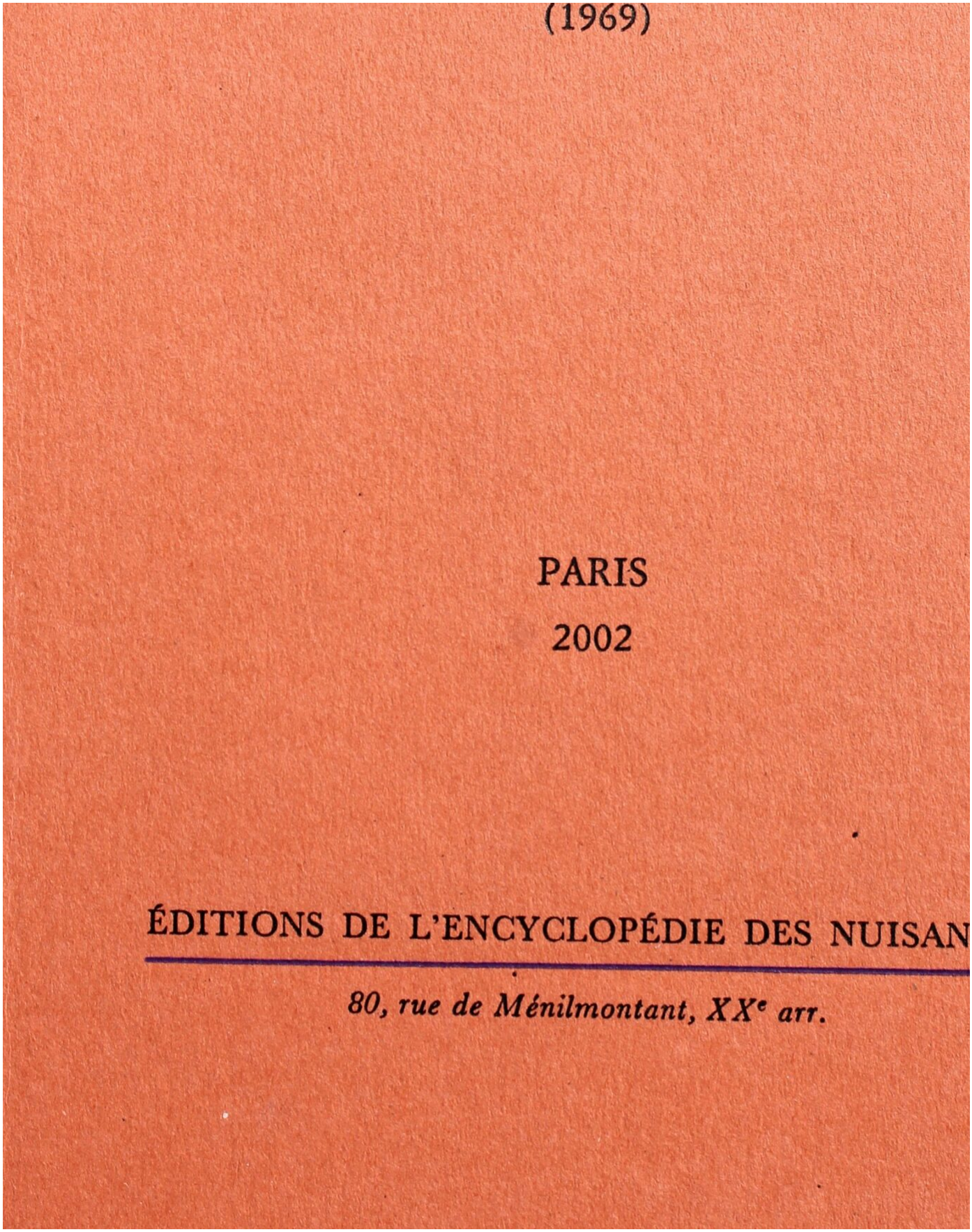


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In 1971, he co-founded the Pyrénées-Atlantiques division of the Société pour l'étude, la protection et l'aménagement de la nature dans le Sud-Ouest (Society for the

Study, Protection, and Planning of Nature in the South West), with one of its aims being to fight against the opening of new quarries and gravel pits, and plans for marinas on the Gave d'Ossau river. The same year, he began his "Chronique de l'an deux mille" column in *Foi & Vie*, which was largely devoted to ecology. In 1972, he was a close associate of Pierre Fournier (journalist at *Hara-Kiri* and later *Charlie hebdo*) when Fournier founded *La Gueule ouverte* – "the newspaper that heralds the end of the world" – a proudly "radical and global" publication. From the second edition onwards, Charbonneau wrote a "Chronique du terrain vague" column, in which he argued in favour of an alliance between ecologists and farmers against "industrial totalitarianism".

In 1974, the editor of *Combat nature*, "the journal of ecology associations and environmental protection", asked him to provide a philosophical foundation for the movement. He did so until his death. Simultaneously, he waged a battle against the government, which was attempting to hand over coastal land to developers looking to promote large-scale tourism in Gironde and Landes under the guise of town and country planning measures.

Charbonneau created the Comité de défense de la côte aquitaine (Aquitaine Coast Defence Committee, CDCA), which brought together citizens, Occitan activists, and "leftists" of various kinds to fight against the resortification of the coast, which would have involved the building of hotels, fast roads, ports, marinas, golf courses, etc. The CDCA organised media campaigns and demonstrations, and provided independent expertise to counter the government machine.

Charbonneau did not only take on local challenges. In 1976, he was among the founders of the federalist, anti-nuclear European Network for Ecological Reflection and Action (ECOROPA). He was seventy when he published *The Green Light*. In 1982, he and Jacques Ellul created the Groupe du Chêne, a small-scale working group that aimed to act as a kind of thinktank for the entire ecology movement. Because he always sought to place the question of humanity's relationship to nature at the heart of politics, he disapproved of the creation of environmental parties, on the model of the German Greens.

His was an applied approach, in which his thought was the richer for his actions, and his actions the richer for his thought. Running the risk of oversimplification, we might summarise it in one sentence: Humans need nature as much as they need freedom, but techno-industrial society threatens the former as well as the latter.

An ecologist unlike any other

Charbonneau lambasted the standardisation of taste and the harmful effects of agroindustry, which eradicated not only the peasant way of life but landscapes and food with a genuine connection to the land from which it came. He highlighted the paradox of mass tourism, which came from an authentic desire to escape from city life, but which pillaged the spaces these fugitives discover and brought with it exactly what the city-dwelling tourist was trying to escape: overcrowding, concrete, and regulations.

"Nature is both the mother who has given birth to us, and the daughter we have conceived; should she disappear, humanity itself will regress into chaos.[8] Our bodies mean we belong to nature, but at the same time, we are called to go beyond it. Our duty, he argued, is to always keep these two considerations in mind. Humanity is part of nature, as nature is the origin of our aesthetic, physical, sensual and even spiritual joys. But when humanity comes out of nature, as a child comes out of its mother, it becomes something separate. Humanity must give life meaning, at each instant, through its quest for freedom; for nature, as a majestic entity, does not exist. Not only is a feeling for nature a modern invention, but it is also primarily found among civilised rather than "primitive" people, the bourgeois rather than peasants, city-dwellers rather than country folk.

Charbonneau thought that it was not so much nature that was threatened by the cult of progress as human freedom. The desire to seek infinite development in a finite world disrupts both nature and freedom, since humanity has a dialectic relationship with nature. Our freedom commands us to master nature, but if we destroy it, or even impose structure on it, we are simultaneously destroying our ability to experience our own freedom. What is the point of leaving behind the constraints of urban life at a set time each year, only to encounter them reproduced in miniature in another location?

To find nature again, we must first understand that we have lost it. For Charbonneau, nature was thus our own freedom by another name. Our feeling for nature is one and the same as our awareness of our own lives. Freedom is not one value among others, but the starting point from which all else follows. A common pitfall among intellectuals is to adopt an idealist, absolutist vision of freedom, rather than living it, in its prosaic, relative reality. When Charbonneau railed against "industrial totalitarianism", he was unafraid of using a concept usually reserved for fascist and communist regimes to describe the trajectory of all modern societies.

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In his eyes, the process had entered its final stages: "You can get on a plane, but you can't truly ever get off.[9] The last "natural" spaces were being slowly conquered by the tourism industry, and everyone and everywhere was becoming part of industrial society. Modern tourism is a social fact that presupposes a level of structure, which is the opposite of what we look for in our contact with nature: the feeling of freedom. The structure of tourism has become a keystone of techno-industrial society.

Charbonneau considered tourism to be the most destructive industry of all, because it is driven by the quest for and consumption of space. The less space there is, the higher the demand; the more nature disappears, the more city-dwellers feel a need for it. He summarised this phenomenon thus: "Because there are machines, people get into machines in order to flee from the machine … the crowd flees from the crowd, the civilised from civilisation. This is how nature is disappearing, destroyed by the very feeling that it arouses, as much as by the expansion of industry."[10] Under capitalism, tourism has become a form of heavy industry, mass-producing standardised products.

Charbonneau does not offer any neat solutions, but instead suggests a direction of travel: accepting limits, and recognising the finite nature of earthly space-time. In practice, this means ceilings on visitor numbers for islands, caves, historic sites, and monuments of various kinds. Tourism must be made to tread lighter and be more thinly spread. We should reject our current approach to building next to beaches and ski slopes, opting for campsites and wooden buildings rather than towers of glass and steel, existing small hotels rather than hotel complexes, and small roads rather than motorways.

This artisanal tourism would create jobs and most importantly be kinder to natural environments, as it would mean new motorways would not be built. Some spaces must be kept unstructured. This is why Charbonneau rejected the national park system, which results in an under-protected zone just outside the boundary, and an over-protected zone within it. Rather than letting land wither away all the better to hand it over to developers, he argued it was better to tend it in such a way that the inhabitants could welcome visitors.

Charbonneau believed that humans need to re-establish a normal relationship with space. As space is linked to time, speed crushes it, while a more leisurely pace allows it to unfold. This is why he was in favour of cycling and walking. Moving slowly reveals the richness of the land. When we visit somewhere in a way that "takes time", we get knowledge and experience in return. Sedentary approaches must be prioritised over nomadic ones. Why is it supposed to be pleasurable to be shipped about like a parcel to "get an eyeful" of an increasingly superficial and stereotyped tourist attraction? It would be better to tend our own garden, if we have one, or decorate our flat, or to paint, sculpt, or play an instrument. We should focus on things that calm us, slow us down, and root us, anything that can turn us from a tourist into an "embedded inhabitant".

Charbonneau wanted to combat speculation by banning property companies from buying farms and estates, but he thought that rather than lambasting second homes – a catch-all category – it would be better to help them to become primary residences. He suggested renovating small and medium-sized dwellings, which would either be physically and spiritually owned and dwelt in by their owners, or let out, which would have the advantage of restoring built rural heritage.

Against car culture

Above a certain level, progress does not make food any better or more nutritious, and likewise improvements in transport do not make journeys any better: "The spread of the battery farming of tourists, combined with the widespread use of agrochemicals, is in the process of destroying all dietary diversity."[11] We must avoid the market becoming split "between chemical chow and luxury natural food". Organic produce should not become an island lost on an ocean of pollution. Especially as this pollution increases in tandem with urbanisation and the car traffic that comes along with it.

How can we live our lives in the middle of a perpetual building site? Growth has become a shared dogma, and so knows no borders.

People are born to be free (and to walk freely), but they live and die as slaves to their cars. "We think we are building cars, when in fact we are building a society,"[12] Charbonneau wrote in *L'Hommauto*. "What good is a car if you never get out of it?" he asked, rhetorically. Drivers have made their cars into gods, to which they are ready to sacrifice everything. They may have started as a means, but now cars are seen as ends in themselves. Westerners invented motorised vehicles so that they could go wherever they wanted, but in the end, they only go where their cars take them, as these machines can only operate within a rigid structure. At a time when Taylorism and Fordism were king, Charbonneau thought it was entirely understandable that assembly line workers might want to step away from the grindstone. The car became a way of getting away from it all as much as a form of transport, allowing victims of the industrial system to satisfy a need to express themselves that their work could not satisfy. In the middle of the 1960s, he observed that a section of the population lived and died in their cars.

Allowing as many people as possible to buy a car, to move around more quickly and go wherever they want, is at first glance aligned with democratic ideals. But the inevitable consequence is that the globe is filled with traffic-clogged roads on the way in and out of cities, and further out, motorways that are often of little use. "Cars negate distance, but they negate the landscape at the same time," noted the avid walker. "We get in the car to get out of the city, but city car life comes with us." The herd of "nature-loving" drivers all head to the same places at the same time. Not only do city-dwellers sit in traffic jams on their way to and from holidays and weekends away, but they also spend time in gridlock on their way to work. "It is in machines that we go to serve the machines," because we work to buy and feed the beast, towards which all our energies are directed. In the techno-industrial society, everyone has two jobs: their own, and that of chauffeur.

According to Charbonneau, the acceleration of scientific and technological progress means we never get far beyond the drawing board. When everything changes all the time, individuals tire themselves out in a perpetual effort to adapt. How can we live our lives in the middle of a perpetual building site? Growth has become a shared dogma, and so knows no borders. Nothing can stop it. Charbonneau does not argue with the necessity of change, but instead opposes the ways in which and the speed at which it occurs. His assessment in an unpublished 1990 text was that: "Change rules over our society more so than any other, both practically and morally, and so history now flows like an unchecked torrent." The ideology of "progress" that drives industrial civilisation has made change both a reality and a value.

Re-establishing balance

Charbonneau always based his reasoning on personal experience, willing to bet it had universal resonance. He thus took Bordeaux as an example of the changes that occurred between 1950 and 1980. Among France's largest urban centres, the Gironde city was no better preserved or more significantly altered than its counterparts. Before the Second World War, Charbonneau still used to see cats and dogs wandering freely in front of the central post office. Machines adapted to the rhythm of living creatures, not vice versa. You could cross the street without a second glance. If you had a hankering for the countryside, a quarter of an hour's cycling would get you to a meadow or a wood.

"The major post-war change was the integration of the countryside into the industrial and urban system, with the effect of transforming it into an extension of the city."[13] Looking at the ravages of urban sprawl and land take, Charbonneau wondered whether the countryside might have changed faster than the cities. As he saw it, the trend towards architecturally bland detached homes was inexorably destroying local architecture and local landscapes. Everywhere, the countryside was being erased, not to turn it into the city, but to impose a feral form of urbanisation that led to "total suburbanisation".

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His 1980 "Internal critique of the ecologist movement" still feels current, as the following examples show. Moratoriums are needed to impose limits on development, as on the Côte d'Azur, where continued urban sprawl must be prevented. In terms of energy, we must not trade all-nuclear for all-solar, to avoid occupying finite, fragile land. The solution cannot be a miracle technology but must come from a combination of various sources of energy, and most importantly, a reduction in consumption. Since limiting economic growth also means limiting demographic growth, Charbonneau explicitly opposed natalist policies.

We must also resist the tyranny of the market, which drives the unbridled exploitation of the planet and its inhabitants. Having spread over the entire surface of the earth, productivist logic enforces itself just as strongly as does any totalitarian regime. Ecologists must "remove all goods previously considered free or "priceless" from the imperialism of the market and give them back to nature or to private life," and so turn away from a world in which everything can be bought and sold.

Along the lines suggested by Ernst F. Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful*, which he cites, and the work of Leopold Kohr and Murray Bookchin, of which he seems to have been unaware, Charbonneau argues that ecologists must break up the capitalist economy into small, autarkic, self-managing units, which would mitigate one type of wound inflicted by the globalised economy: the accelerated destruction of nature caused by the transportation of merchandise from one end of the planet to the other.[14]

Conscious of the seriousness of the diagnosis, Charbonneau offered no miracle cure, but instead invited the patient to slow down, respect their limits, and get their bearings. We must learn to root ourselves in time and space. Shunted around by the job market, workers, employees, managers, teachers, and civil servants are all too weightless to put down roots. Nature moves slowly, and humans, too, need time to evolve gently. Happiness is found in savouring the present moment and not in an endless wait for the hope of a better world to come. Not only do we need to know how to take our time, in order to enjoy the moment, but we also need to work with what already exists and move forward from there, rather than trying to wipe the slate clean and start again from scratch.

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