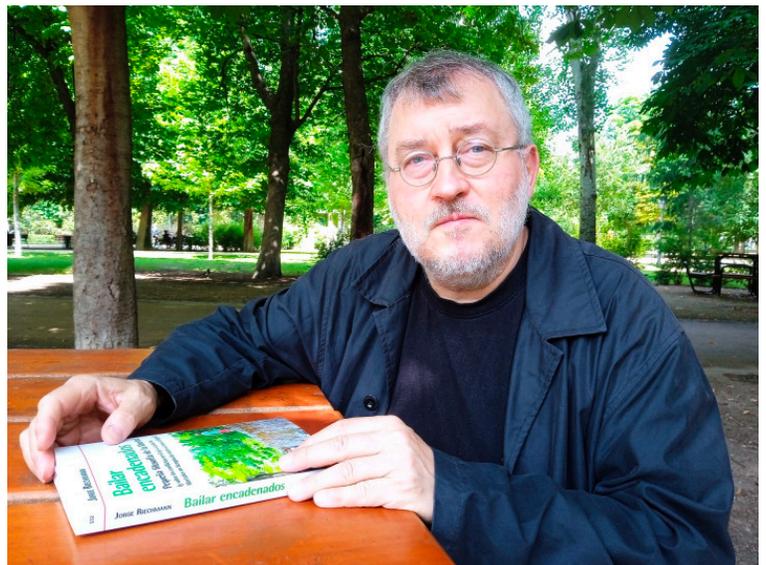


# "If we can prevent the genocide of billions of human beings, I would be happy"

*An interview...*

## Jorge Riechmann and Gorka Castillo

**P**hilosopher, poet, ecologist, translator and one of the most respected voices in ecosocialism, Jorge Riechmann (Madrid, 1962), has just published his latest book, *Bailar encadenados*. *Pequeña filosofía de la libertad* (Ed. Icaria), an essay in which he once again sticks his finger in the eye of power with a lucid analysis of the value most scorched by impatient neoliberalism. "Freedom does not include the right to harm", he states. Overwhelmed by the ecosocial crisis in which humanity is involved, Riechmann examines the facets that make up the false reality created by digital technologies, paying special attention to the enormous influence they exert on the acceleration capitalism is undergoing in a context of extreme limitations. As a patriot of biodiversity, he concludes with a bittersweet certainty: "We will not be able to avoid ecological-social collapse if we continue to protect this economic system". The author of more than a hundred books in which he reconciles his philosophical concerns and his pleasure in poetry, Riechmann insists that what is at stake today is, quite simply, the survival of the human species. That is why his commitment to environmentalism is indestructible. He is one of 15 activists



Jorge Riechmann with his new book during the interview. / G.C.

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from the Rebelión Científica collective who were arrested in April last year for staging a protest action in Congress and now face possible jail sentences. "When institutions have a sense of fragility, they tend to perceive any kind of social protest as problematic," he says.

**Gorka Castillo:** The disasters associated with climate change are happening in different parts of the world. What role is left for people beyond "getting used to what is coming", as some say?

**Jorge Riechmann:** The problem with this idea of "getting used to what is coming" is that, without major changes in the capitalist system, what is coming is a constant worsening of living conditions that brings us closer to an uninhabitable planet. Moreover, the phrase contains an internal contradiction because to get used to a new situation, a certain stability is needed, and we are not heading towards precisely that scenario but rather towards a time of ruptures and discontinuities.

**GC:** You have just published a 300-page book dedicated to the term freedom, to its polysemic value, but the most accepted is the most banal of all, such as being able to go out for a drink and the like. Is something wrong?

**JR:** What is failing, in my opinion, is, above all, to take responsibility for the real situation in which we find ourselves. I mean that planet Earth may no longer be habitable for beings like us, the ones causing the disaster.

*The situation has changed so much that human actions that once seemed ethically and politically neutral to us are no longer so.*

That is unprecedented. That is why we talk about anthropogenic climate change or the sixth anthropogenic mega-extinction. If we realise that one of the major determinants of this situation is the overreach of the Earth's biophysical margins, we realise that the meaning of the word

'freedom' may be different from what it was a few years ago. I explore this in the book *Bailar Encadenados* (Dancing in Chains). The historical situation has changed so much in such a short time that human actions that once seemed ethically and politically neutral to us are no longer so. For example, eating meat or travelling by private car no longer have the same meaning today as they did a century ago. Now, in a "crowded world", they mean harm to others. We have great difficulty in grasping how fast things have changed. We live in a period we call the Great Acceleration, and it has taken us into another world.

**GC:** A world marked by the technological revolution and artificial intelligence has made people freer than before. Why do you consider this transformation as one of the main threats to freedom in the book?

**JR:** There are several dimensions to distinguish. On the one hand, there is no doubt that having access from a mobile phone or a computer to enormous amounts of information, accessing entire libraries and film libraries or

*Digital technologies are being used by a small group of people to reconfigure their subjective reality without any change in their sense of freedom.*

countless recordings of music is an advance that encourages a truly intoxicating sense of human progress. But beyond this luminous illusion, the picture darkens if we think that these devices are powerful instruments of control of human behaviour that a small group of people use to reconfigure people's subjective reality

without, at the same time, altering the feeling that we live freely. Obviously, this gives them a power that no one has ever had before in human history. If we add the acceleration these digital technologies provoke on the

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mechanisms of capital accumulation and the regressive distribution of wealth, the problem we face is quite serious.

GC: Now that artificial intelligence has emerged, are they a risk or tools that extend human capabilities?

JR: Yes, some professors already use them as research aids, but if we stop there, we will be missing many dimensions that prevent us from knowing what is really at stake—for example, the gain of oligopolistic power and control that they bring. Bear in mind that these generative artificial intelligence of the ChatGPT type are being trained with an enormous amount of information that, in principle, should not be accessible. I am talking about private data or intellectual property rights. Nor should we lose sight of the fact that these supposed technological benefits go hand in hand with the atrophy of other human capacities that may be important as soon as circumstances change a little. It is not just that this digital world is destroying our attention span and concentration, but that if the prospects ahead are our societies' energetic and metabolic decline, the internet may not always be with us. Therefore, relying on such a network to regulate essential public services, such as electricity or health care, may not be a good idea.

GC: But the promoters of these technologies argue that, in the end, everything will depend on each person's use of these tools. What do you think?

JR: This statement masks the false idea of the neutrality of techniques and technologies. The clichéd analogy of using a hammer, which can be used to hammer in a nail as well as to split someone's head open, is used. But this analogy does not hold up even with the simplest of tools, let alone with the complex technologies that are now being deployed and shaping the world. It is clear that Zuckerberg's metaverse or advanced artificial intelligence, which shapes human choices and prefigures our decisions, is far from neutral and should, therefore, be subject to extensive democratic deliberation and rigorous social control.

GC: How do we deal with the technological and climatic changes that humanity is facing today?

JR: By assuming, for example, that we need major systemic changes to guide us in a different way. Instead of continuing to think in terms of supply expansion, today, we need strong public policies to manage demand. This is one of the ways in which degrowth could be realised, and it has been on the table since the first oil crisis in 1973. In that phase of the Great Acceleration, Societies that had become accustomed to the idea that energy policy was the same as having ever-increasing amounts of energy, suddenly realised that they needed to organise social coexistence with a certain limited level of energy, even that it had to decrease. This is still our situation.

GC: Do you think that the energy transition that has been undertaken is not enough?

JR: It is very reductive. First, it should be clear that a real ecological transition is much more than just an energy transition - think, for example, of agroecology and renaturalisation initiatives! It is believed that by decarbonising the electricity supply, we can run on photovoltaics and wind power, and that is fine as a principle but not enough. The key is "less": we must use less energy and electricity. And to move towards that fairly, we need to design demand-side management policies, i.e. to find ways to meet our basic needs with less

*Freedom does not include the right to harm, which is what the right-wing formulates.*

energy use. But this can meet with social resistance, as we see, for example, with the conflict in Germany over the so-called heating law that puts an end to the installation of gas or oil boilers in favour of heat pumps. Well, the right is waging war against this policy, which is nothing more than managing decarbonisation, because who will impose a heating system on them or who will prevent them from installing an oil boiler if they want to do so? We could reply that freedom does not include the right to harm, which is what they formulate. We return to the themes of my book, *Bailar Encadenados*—a little philosophy of freedom.

**GC:** But these eco-fascist approaches are growing all the time. People care less and less about the lies they are told. Why is that?

**JR:** In difficult times like the present, when the future we have been told about is not going to happen, when all the narratives of meritocratic success fall away, and everything seems to be shaken, there is often a protective reaction to one's beliefs that pushes us to cling to strong leaders who promise security. It is not easy to get out of that place because we will need a kind of mourning for those frustrated expectations, many of them knotted to the myth of Progress (with capital letters). Questioning some of our fundamental beliefs is always very costly at the individual and collective level, but we have to come to terms with a difficult reality, such as the energetic decline we were talking about earlier. I do not know if those of us who want to maintain prospects of survival and emancipation in a society with acceptable levels of "equality" will be able to do so, but we have to insist on it.

**GC:** What does the future hold for states that organise world summits to save the planet but continue to value the success of their model in terms of economic growth?

**JR:** If we are generous in our interpretation, we would think that they are pursuing incompatible goals. But you cannot protect the existing world (dis)order and avoid the ecological-social collapse towards which we are heading or perhaps are already heading at the same time. Therefore, I repeat that the most crucial task now is to take charge of reality to face a new order beyond capitalism that allows us to make peace with nature, as the title of a book by Barry Commoner put it. We will not move forward if we do not build a horizon of culture-nature symbiosis.

**GC:** And do you think capitalism will be able to amend itself?

**JR:** The answer is no if we want to move forward without leaving anyone behind. Capitalism cannot do it. Capitalism cannot do that. It can, perhaps, convert itself into a system that works for a much smaller number of people, which opens up a horizon of genocide, perhaps in a time-delayed way. It would be a way of accepting that the planet is not enough for everyone but enough for my group or my nation. Trump's slogan of 'America first' and that of some countries and social sectors of the global North goes in this direction.

**GC:** One of the accusations that neoliberals make of environmentalism is that it is an ideology that undermines freedom.

**JR:** First, we would have to agree on what ideology is. If you understand it as a worldview in a broad sense, there would be no problem in recognising that environmentalism is an ideology, understood as an articulated set of ideas and values with a certain social orientation. But if the term is used in a pejorative or derogatory way, as a false consciousness linked to certain partial social interests, then it is not. So, environmentalisms tend to be anti-

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ideological because they challenge this feigned productivist and developmentalist consciousness linked to specific practices and sentiments prevalent in the dominant culture, such as that economic growth is good in itself or the shallow idea of freedom as mere non-interference.

GC: [You and 14 other scientists have been charged](#) with "damage to heritage" for a protest on the steps of Congress.

JR: The examining magistrate considers that there is evidence of a crime of damage to historical heritage, and we are awaiting the decision of the prosecutor's office. Then, the 15 members of Scientist Rebellion, including myself, will know if there is a formal accusation against us. The problem is that the prosecutor's decision is taking too long, and that always generates uncertainty.

GC: It seems that social activism has become increasingly uncomfortable for those in power. In the UK, two environmentalists have been sentenced to three years in prison for a non-violent action and the Macron government has approved the dissolution of the environmental coalition '[Soulèvements de la Terre](#)'. Are you the new enemies of capitalism?

JR: We are witnessing a hardening of repression and social control almost everywhere in the world. Not only in its obvious forms - increasingly authoritarian states - but also, as I said before, on a digital level which is really worrying. We are witnessing increasing militarisation and increasingly coercive reactions as new forms of protest develop, for example against climate change. In the UK, Germany and France, ad hoc legislation is being passed that is very much designed to discourage these kinds of protests. But this discomfort is the result of the existence of a certain democratic deficit. When institutions have a sense of fragility, they tend to perceive any kind of social response as problematic. If they had more democratic muscle they would not be viewed with concern.

GC: What would be the idyllic society for you?

JR: I would not use the term idyllic or ideal. Illusions of a paradise seem to me to be negative. We have to get used to the idea that there will be no end to our human adventure, and there will always be elements of conflict and debate going forward unless we disappear as a species. But in the short term, we have to face the possibilities of ecological-social collapse. In a minimalist way, I would say that if we reach the following decades with a more or less stabilised climatic and ecological situation and manage to avoid the genocide of billions of human beings, which is the horizon we have now, I would be happy. It is not impossible to achieve, but we must do our utmost to move towards it.

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- ❖ **About the authors:** **Jorge Riechmann** is a Spanish poet, translator, essayist, mathematician, philosopher, ecologist and doctor in political science. **Gorka Castillo** is an all-round journalist.
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