

“Are you ready to extract yourself from the Economy?”

Bruno Latour

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kindly translated from French by Timothy Howles)

“The [French] President is putting in place a commission of international experts to prepare for the great challenges ahead”, reports *Le Monde* in its edition of 29th May. Its journalists then add: “the choice was made to privilege a commission that is homogenous in terms of its profile and expertise, in such a way as to have the response of academics to these great challenges. But their contribution will be merely one among others and will not exhaust its subjects, the Elysée reassures us”. Why do I not feel at all “reassured” by that? My thoughts turned to the Restoration, which the easing of lockdown is more and more seeming to resemble: just as was the case for the Bourbon regime of 1814, it is possible that this committee, even if it is composed of excellent minds, has “forgotten nothing and learned nothing”.¹

It would certainly be a shame to lose too quickly all the benefit of what Covid-19 has revealed to be essential. In the midst of the chaos, of the world crisis that is to come, of the grief and suffering, there is at least one thing that everyone has been able to grasp: something is wrong with the economy. First of all, of course, because it seems that it can be suspended in one fell swoop; it no longer has the appearance of an irreversible movement that can neither slow down, nor by any means stop, without risk of catastrophe. Next, because all those in lockdown have noticed that class relations, which were solemnly declared to have been abrogated, have become as visible as they were in the time of Dickens or Proudhon: the revaluation of values has taken a serious hit, adding a new spin to the famous Gospel injunction: “the first (those at the top) will be last and the last (those at the bottom) will be first” (Matthew 19:30).²

We knew already that something is wrong with the economy, you might say; that has not started with the virus. Yes, yes, but what is more insidious is that we are now saying that something is wrong in the way the economy

¹ Trans. This quote, thought to have originated in a 1796 letter by the French naval officer Charles Louis Etienne and subsequently used by Talleyrand, refers to the restored Bourbon dynasty after the abdication of Napoleon.

² Trans. Latour uses two phrases, *de cordée* and *de corvée*, that have recently been popularized in the rhetoric of opposition to President Macron, for which see: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/langue-francaise/actu-des-mots/2018/04/18/37002-20180418ARTFIG00088-premier-de-cordee-d-o-vient-l-expression-favorite-d-emmanuel-macron.php>.

defines the world. When we say that “the economy has to start up again”, we ask ourselves, *in petto*, “but actually, why? Is that really such a good idea?”

Well, we shouldn’t have been given the time to reflect at such length! Carried along by development, dazzled by the promise of abundance, we were probably destined never to view things other than through the prism of the economy. Then, for just two months, we found ourselves extracted from this self-evident situation, like a fish out of water who realises that its living environment is not the only one. Paradoxically, the lockdown has “opened doors” by liberating us from our accustomed patterns.

And so the release from lockdown seems like the much more painful thing; like a prisoner who, having been granted temporary leave, finds it all the more unbearable to have to return to the cell to which he had become so habituated. We were expecting a great wind of liberation, but are being enclosed all over again in the ineluctable “forward march of the economy” – in spite of the fact that for the last two months our explorations of the “world to come” have never been more intense. So will everything go back to how it was before? It’s probable, but not inevitable.

The doubt that has been introduced during this hiatus is too profound; it has insinuated itself too widely; it has taken a stranglehold on too many people. Even in January, perhaps, the idea of the President surrounding himself with a commission of economic experts would have felt like a reassuring sign; but after Covid-19, it does nothing but fill us with dread: “what, they’re going to start up again by grasping the entirety of the current situation as *part of the economy*? And entrust the whole thing to a ‘commission that is homogenous in terms of its profile and expertise’. Are they really competent to grasp the situation as it now appears to us in light of this unexpected suspension?”

That the economy can seem detached from normal human experience has been understood by many researchers and activists, of course, but the painful experience of the pandemic has made this rupture widely-known. Millions of people have had the same experience as Jim Carrey, the hero of *The Truman Show*: they have finally punctured a hole in the set and have realised that the stage-décor can be separated from the metal framework that holds it up. From this experience, from this rupture, from this doubt, there is no coming back. You will never make Carrey return for a *second time* onto the film set – in the hope that it will “work” this time!

Until now, the specialized term for speaking of this rupture was “economization”. Material existence is not, by itself, made of economic relations. Humans have a multitude of relations between themselves and with the things amongst which they live that mobilise an extraordinarily large range of passions, affects, know-how, techniques and inventions. Moreover,

the majority of human societies do not have a unified term to account for this multitude of relations: they are coextensive with life itself. Marcel Mauss a hundred years ago, Marshall Sahlins fifty years ago, Philippe Descola or Nastassja Martin today, in short, a large part of anthropology has never stopped exploring this trail.³

It just so happens that, in certain recent societies, a concerted work of *formatting* has tried (without ever completely succeeding) to reduce and simplify these relations, to *extract* from them certain types of passion, affect, know-how, technique and invention, and to *ignore* all the others. To use the term “economization” is to highlight this work of formatting so as to avoid confusing it with the multitude of relations necessary for the continuation of life. It is also to introduce a distinction between *the economic disciplines* and the object that is properly theirs (the word “discipline” is preferable to the word “science” in order to properly highlight the distance between the two). These activities carry out formatting, what we call “investments of form”, but they cannot take the place of experience, which they simplify or reduce. The distinction is the same as that between *constructing* the film-set on which Jim Carrey will “appear” and *broadcasting* the production in which he features.

There is a tendency to say that the economic disciplines *perform* the thing they study – the expression “performativity” is borrowed from linguistics to designate expressions that enact what they say by the very act of saying it – whether promises, threats or legal acts.⁴ Nothing strange in that, and nothing to criticise either. It is a general principle that one cannot grasp any object without first formatting it.

For example, there is no phenomenon more objective and better assured today than asepsis. And yet, when I want to prove to my ten-year old grandson the existence of asepsis, I must help him understand all the gestures that will preserve the chicken broth he has sealed in a jam-jar safe from contamination (and this is not so easy to explain via Zoom during the lockdown!). It is not enough to show him flasks from the hands of Pasteur’s glassmaker where the liquid is still perfectly pure after one hundred and fifty years. My grandson

³ There is a huge literature, but roughly: Sahlins, Marshall, *Stone Age Economics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, 1972); Descola, Philippe, *The Ecology of Others: Anthropology and the Question of Nature* (translated by Geneviève Godbout & Benjamin P. Luley, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2013); Martin, Nastassja, *Les âmes sauvages. Face à l’Occident, la résistance d’un peuple d’Alaska* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016); and for industrial societies, Callon, Michel, ed. *Sociologie des agencements marchands. Textes choisis* (Paris: Presses de l’Ecole Nationale des Mines de Paris, 2013); Mitchell, Timothy, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁴ Donald MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa & Lucia Siu, eds., *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Ulysse must *obtain* an understanding of this objective fact by learning a whole set of practices that make possible the emergence of an entirely new phenomenon: asepsis becomes possible thanks to these practices and did not exist before (this creates, moreover, for the microbes an entirely new selection pressure too). The permanence of asepsis as a well-established fact thus depends on the permanence of an institution – and of carefully-maintained procedures in laboratories, clean-rooms, pharmaceutical factories, experimental teaching rooms, etc.

Pursuing the analogy, economization is as objective but also as carefully and obstinately constructed a phenomenon as asepsis. All it takes is for Ulysee to make the slightest error in scalding the glass flask, or in applying its lid, and a few days later the chicken broth will be cloudy with contamination. The same pertains to economization: two months in lockdown, away from our usual framework, and look how the “bad habits” return, how innumerable relations whose presence had been forgotten or denied start to proliferate. Keeping ourselves from contamination is just as difficult as remaining submitted to economisation [*économisable*]. The lesson is as valid for Covid-19 as it is for the economic disciplines. It always takes an institution in good working order to maintain the continuity of a fact or of a proof.

Just as microbes were not prepared to find themselves confronted by the protective measures of asepsis invented by the Pasteurians, so human beings immersed in material relations with things all around them were not prepared for the dressage that economization would impose upon them from the 18th century onwards. By himself, nobody becomes a *detached* individual, able to calculate a *self-serving* agenda and to enter into *competition* with everyone else in search of *profit*. These highlighted words identify properties that truly exist in the world, but only because they were first extracted, maintained, connected and assured by the immense assistance of accounting tools, title deeds, business schools and scholarly algorithms. *Homo oeconomicus* is just like a strain of bacteria cultivated in a petri-dish: it exists, but there is nothing natural, native or spontaneous about him. Alleviate the conditions, and see how it is emancipated, like a virus suddenly abandoned in a laboratory from which funding has suddenly been pulled — ready to go around the world.

We can go even further. In a book that is full of humour (and in a recent article in *Libération*), David Graeber suggests that the more difficult the formatting and the more agents “resist” its discipline, the more violent the “economization” [*mise en économie*].⁵ The less realistic economization seems,

⁵ Graeber, David, *Bullshit Jobs: The Rise of Pointless Work, and What We Can Do About It* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018). In French, see also his opinion piece in *Libération*

the more there is need of operators, officials, consultants, accountants and auditors of all kinds to enforce its operation. While it is relatively easy to count the number of steel plates produced by a rolling mill (a digital sensor and spreadsheet will suffice), if you want to calculate the productivity of a care-assistant, teacher or fire officer you will have to multiply the number of intermediaries to render their activity compatible with an Excel spreadsheet. Hence, according to Graeber, the multiplication of “bullshit jobs”.

If the experience of the pandemic has any meaning, it's to reveal the speed with which the notion of productivity has come to depend on accounting tools. Yes, it's true, you can't calculate the productivity of teachers, nurses, housewives very accurately. What conclusion do we draw from this? That they are unproductive? That they deserve to be paid less and kept at the bottom of the ladder? Or that it doesn't matter, because this is not the issue? Whatever name you give to their “production”, it is both indispensable and incalculable; well, let others grapple with this contradiction; it simply means that these activities belong to a type of action that is *non-economizable*. The realisation by everybody that this resistance to countability is of “no importance” casts doubt on all other operations of economization. This is where the economic grip on the conditions of life breaks away from what it describes, like a cracked wall panel detaches itself from its surroundings.

“But surely, readers will say, by dint of the economic disciplines that institute the economy as an extraction of the relationships that make life possible, we, at least, we the producers and consumers of industrialized countries, we *have certainly become*, after so much formatting, people who can be economized wholesale and with almost no remainder. There may well have been other ways of relating to the world in other times and places, and in the moving accounts of ethnologists, but that's gone forever, at least for us. We have truly become those selfish individuals in competition with one another, capable of calculating our interests to the nearest decimal point.”

This is where the shock of Covid-19 compels us to reflect: believing in its irreversibility is like believing that progress in hygiene, in vaccination, or in anti-septic methods have rid us forever of microbes ... what was true in January 2020 is perhaps no longer true in June 2020.

A hiatus of just two months is all it took to achieve what numerous studies by sociologists of markets and anthropologists of finance would never have achieved: a widely-shared realization that the economy holds in place only as long as the institution that performs it – *and not a day longer*. The proliferating

ways of relating necessary for life continue, spilling over and invading the narrow format of economization, just as teaming viruses, bacteriophages and bacteria continue to connect, in countless different ways, beings as distant as bats, hungry Chinese people and gastronomes, not to mention Bill Gates and Dr Fauci. This is the contamination: from about fifty colleagues in science studies to tens of millions of people peacefully signing up to the numerous movements, unions, parties and diverse traditions that have good reason to distrust the economy and economists (however “expert”, “homogenous” and qualified they might be). The hapless Jim Carrey has now turned into a crowd.

What the pandemic makes more intense, then, is not merely doubt about the usefulness and productivity of various trades, goods, products and companies – but doubt about how concepts and formats provided by the economy have grasped the forms of life which we all need to subsist. Productivity – its calculation, its measure, its intensification – is gradually being replaced, thanks to the virus, by a totally different question: a question of subsistence. This is the turning-point; this is the doubt; this is the point of no return: not *what* and *how* to produce, but is “producing” a good way of connecting to the world? Just as we cannot continue to “wage war” on the virus without understanding the multitude of relations of co-existence with them, neither can we continue to “produce” without understanding the relations of subsistence that make all production possible. That is the enduring lesson of the pandemic.

And not merely because, at the beginning, for two months, we saw so many coffins on TV and heard ambulances going down empty streets, but also because, one thing leading to another, from questions about missing PPE to hospital beds, we have ended up questioning the value and politics of *life* – what makes it possible, what sustains it, what makes it liveable and just.

At the beginning, of course, it was about stopping the spread, by means of the paradoxical invention of preventative measures that required all of us, as an act of solidarity, to remain locked in our homes. Then, in a second stage, we began to see proliferate in full view the work of these “forgotten people” [*petites gens*], who we noticed, more and more every day, were indispensable – here was a return to the question of class relations, clearly racialized. There was also the return of hard geopolitical relations and of inequalities between countries, made visible (this has also been one of the enduring lessons) product by product, value chain by value chain, migration route by migration route. As a third stage, employment hierarchies have been shaken up: we began to notice a thousand qualities in less well-paid, less well-regarded jobs, the ones demanding care, attention and multiple precautions. Those who had been most indifferent took to applauding these “carers” from their balcony; where previously they had made do with mowing the lawn, senior executives

put their hand to permaculture; even fathers working remotely noticed that to teach arithmetic to their children required a thousand qualities of patience and obstinacy, the importance of which they had never suspected.

Will all that come to an end? No, because misgivings about production have a funny way of proliferating and of gradually contaminating everything they touch: as soon as we start talking about subsistence or generative practices, the list of beings, affects, passions and relations that make it possible for us to live keeps growing longer. The formatting provided by economization, just as was the case for asepsis, had precisely as its goal to multiply preventative measures in order to limit the number of beings to be *taken into account*, in every sense of the word. It sought to prevent proliferation, to obtain pure cultures, to simplify the grounds for action, which was the only way to make microbes or humans knowable, calculable and manageable. These are the barriers, the roadblocks, the dykes that have begun to crack during the pandemic.

Which would not have been possible without the persistence of another crisis that exceeds it on every side. By a coincidence that is not completely fortuitous, coronavirus has quickly spread amongst people who were *already aware* of the nature of a multiform threat that a generalized crisis of subsistence had been posing to them. Without this other crisis, the pandemic would probably have been addressed as a serious public health challenge, but not as an existential question: people in lockdown would have been cautious about infection, but would not have set about discussing whether it was really useful to produce aeroplanes, to continue cruising on giant ships that look like container vessels, or to expect Argentina to provide the soya required for Breton pigs. The new climactic regime, when superimposed upon the health crisis, casts such fundamental doubt upon the whole question of production that it took only two months of lockdown for the issue to be reinvigorated. Hence the prodigious extension of questions of subsistence.

If the health crisis has reminded us of the role of these forgotten jobs [*petits métiers*], if it has given new significance to the caring professions, if it made class relations more visible, it has also gradually reminded us of the importance of those *other participants* in our ways of life, first microbes, and then, one thing leading to another, all that is needed to maintain in good condition an economy we had hitherto supposed constituted the totality of experience and that would recover. Even the most obtuse reporter, who continues to contrast those who care about the climate with those who simply wish to “restock the fridge”, can no longer ignore the fact that there is nothing in the fridge that does not depend on the climate – not to mention the countless microorganisms associated with the fermentation of cheese, yoghurt and beer.

A citation from Graeber's book on the origin of value (a classic debate between economists) sums up the novel situation. He reminds us that the idea of the labour theory of value was self-evident in the nineteenth-century, before disappearing under the neoliberal barrage of the twentieth, a century that was so forgetful of the conditions of life. So an injustice is inflicted upon creators of value, which he sums up in this quotation: "nowadays, if one speaks of 'wealth producers', people will automatically assume one is referring not to workers, but to capitalists".⁶ But when the importance of work and of care is seen in the light of day, we soon notice that other values, and other "workers", must act if humans are to subsist. To capture this new injustice, we would have to re-write Graeber's words as follows: "nowadays, if one speaks of 'wealth producers', people will automatically assume one is referring not to living things, but to capitalists or workers".

Underneath the capitalists are the workers, and underneath the workers are living things! The Old Mole is still functioning.⁷ Attention has ratcheted up not one notch, but two. The centre of gravity has also shifted. Other sources of value have manifested themselves. This is the world that is now appearing in the full light of day, absolutely refusing to accept the status of "mere resource" granted to it condescendingly by the standard definition of the economy and breaking through all the preventative measures that should have kept it distanced. It's all very well to produce, but we still have to subsist. The pandemic provides this surprising lesson: where we thought we could wage war on the virus, instead we have to learn to live with it with the least detriment to ourselves; where we thought we should have an Economic Recovery, instead we will probably have to learn to exit from the Economy, that simplified summary of forms of life.

Translated by Timothy Howles, 6th June 2020

⁶ Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* p.233.

⁷ Trans. *La Vieille Taupe* was an ultra-left publishing house and bookshop in Paris, its name deriving from a communist conception of the maturation of social forces beneath the surface of society which (it was thought) would eventually erupt in revolutionary movements.