

On some of the affects of capitalism

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For discussion only

“If the world were a bank, they would have already bailed it out”. Such is the slogan painted by Greenpeace militants in one of their recent campaigns. It says a lot about our level of intellectual corruption that we don’t find such a line simply funny but tragically realistic. It has the same bleak degree of realism as Frederick Jameson’s famous quip that: “Nowadays it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism!”.

If you call the world, I mean the world we all live in, “first nature” and capitalism our “second nature” — in the sense of that to which we are fully habituated and which has been totally naturalized — then what those sentences are saying is that the second nature is more solid, less transitory, less perishable than the first. No wonder: the transcendent world of beyond has always been more durable than the poor world of below. But what is new is that this world of beyond is not that of salvation and eternity, but that of economic matters. As Karl Marx would have said, the realm of transcendence has been fully appropriated by banks! Through an unexpected turn of phrase, the world of economy, far from representing a sturdy down to earth materialism, a sound appetite for worldly goods and solid matters of fact, is now final and absolute. How mistaken we were; apparently it is the laws of capitalism that Jesus had in mind when he warned his disciples: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Matt 24-35).

This inversion of what is transitory and what is eternal is no longer a joke, especially since what should be called the “Australian strategy of voluntary sleepwalking toward catastrophe” is being implemented to the full after the last election: not content to dismantle the institutions, scientific establishments and instruments that could prepare his

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constituency to meet the new global threat of climate mutations,¹ the prime minister, Tony Abbott, is also dismantling, one after the other, most departments of social science and humanities.² Such a strategy makes a lot of sense: not thinking ahead is probably, when you are an Australian and given what is coming, the most *rational* thing to do. “Not thinking” seems to be the slogan of the day when you consider that in the United States alone something like a billion dollars,³ yes, one billion, is being spent to generate ignorance about the anthropic origin of climate mutations. In earlier periods, scientists and intellectuals lamented the little money spent on learning, but they never had to witness floods of money spent on *unlearning* what was already known. While in times past thinking critically was associated with looking ahead and extracting oneself from an older obscurantist past, today money is being spent to become even more obscurantist than yesterday! “Agnotology”, Robert Proctor’s science of generating ignorance, has become the most important discipline of the day.⁴ It is thanks to this great new science that so many people are able to say in their heart “Perish the world, provided my bank survives!”. It is a desperate task to continue thinking when the powers of intelligence are dedicated to shutting down thought and to marching ahead with eyes wide closed.

What is there, in **this second nature**, that generates such a lack of sensitivity to the worldly conditions of our existence? This is the problem we have to tackle.

I will take *capitalism* to mean not a thing in the world, but **a certain way of being affected** when trying to think through this strange mixture of *miseries and luxuries* we encounter when trying to come to terms with the dizzying interplays of “goods” and “bads”. Capitalism is a concept invented to help absorb this odd mixture of enthusiasm for the cornucopia of riches that has lifted billions of people out of abject poverty and the indignation, rage and fury in response to the miseries visited on billions of other people. Especially troubling to me is the feeling of *helplessness* that is associated with any discussion of economics and that I have so much trouble reconciling with

¹ <http://www.desmogblog.com/2013/10/09/australia-s-new-prime-minister-surrounded-climate-science-denying-voices-and-advisors>

² <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-November-2012/bode&dale.html>

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/dec/20/conservative-groups-1bn-against-climate-change>

⁴ Robert Proctor, and Londa Schiebinger. *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

what I consider science's and politics' main effects, these being the opening of new possibilities and the provision of margins to maneuver. Why is it that when we are asked or summoned to combat capitalism, we feel, I feel so helpless? Faced with such a question, I will start with this idea—that one of the *affects of capitalism*, that is, of *thinking in terms of capitalism*, is to generate for most of people who don't benefit from its wealth a feeling of *helplessness* and for a few people who benefits from it an immense enthusiasm together with a dumbness of the senses. So when we use capitalism to interpret what is going on, we obtain, on the one hand, binding necessities from which there is no escape and a feeling of revolt against them that often results in *helplessness*; on the other, boundless possibilities coupled with a total indifference for their long-term consequences.

This odd mixture of *fate and hubris* is certainly not the way in which first nature was initially encountered: neither helplessness nor unbound enthusiasm and indifference to consequences would have allowed humans to inhabit the earth for very long. Rather a solid pragmatism, a limited confidence in human cunning, a sane respect for the powers of nature, a great care invested to protect the fragility of human enterprise—these appear to be the virtues for dealing with first nature. Care and caution: a totally mundane grasp of the dangers and of the possibilities of this world of below. A reading of Tim Ingold or of Marshall Sahlins or of any anthropologist of “stone-age economics” will convince you of this point.

It is often said that the reason why second nature is so solid and transcendent it is because it's being governed by “laws of economics” just as eternal and just as solid as “laws of physics”. I heard this old saw repeated only a few days ago on the French radio.⁵ But today it seems more difficult to pile the laws of second nature on top of those of the first. Apparently climate scientists are using the laws of physics to register what happens to first nature while climate deniers are pitting the laws of economics governing second nature against the laws governing the Earth. In one set of laws, CO2 plays no role at all while in the other set, it is one of the main culprits. What a fight! Should we be prepared to say that we know with much greater precision what second nature is than how first nature is being run? Should we say that economists have discovered a kind of certainty, of indisputability, that is superior to the laws of physics? That their CO2 is more

⁵ In a recent radio comment in France Culture morning edition (February 13th, between 8h20am and 8h35), editorialist Brice Couturier said that “it is an illusion to think that politics can beat the laws of economics”, and that these laws are “like the laws of physics”.

real than the climatologists' CO₂? Then Greenpeace would be right: "if the world were a bank, they would have already bailed it out".

That this is not the case will be obvious to any practicing scientist, be they biologist, chemist or physicist — and indeed to any practicing economist. Testing, calculating, combining the laws of nature (I mean first nature) does not generate a feeling of helplessness nor of being faced with indisputable necessities. Quite the contrary. In the laboratory the slogan of the scientists isn't quite Obama's "Yes we can!" but is at least, "Yes we could". And discussion among peers proliferates at once. The closer you are to science, the more possibilities open up; the more intimate your contact with first nature, the more surprises you get, **the more unexpected agencies spring up, the more margins for maneuver you obtain.** Is this not the experience we all have when reading and writing scientific literature? In science, when necessity comes in, it is possibilities that are multiplied.

Why is it the case that when you shift to second nature and its necessities come in, possibilities vanish and a deep feeling of helplessness sets in? Why is the subtext of any allusion to capitalism the sad sentence: "Sorry, there is no other way"? This being said even though economists themselves are angrily disputing with one another so that it is not their unanimous agreement that produces a feeling of helplessness when we are confronted with the laws of second nature (remember President Truman's quip "Please, send me a one-armed economist!" because he was tired of hearing his counselors say: "On the one hand, this" and "On the other hand, that"). Although economists are of course affected by capitalism, they are not the only reason why the results of their research always appear, in the end, as the figure of fate.

Why is fate, the old *fatum* from which no human can escape, always raised in connection with modernization — modernization that defines itself, or at least that used to define itself, as *anti-fate par excellence*? There must be something so poisonous in the idea of capitalism that it has such an effect on thought as to render any alternative unthinkable.

The history of such a poison has been written often. In itself the distribution of unbound possibilities for some, coupled with binding necessities for the many, is as old as commerce. Long ago, Fernand Braudel showed that any marketplace offers occasions (multiplied by the use of financial tools) for some enterprising go-between to treat friends and family as utter strangers and faraway strangers as close buddies. Capitalism, in that sense, feeds on, parasitizes and distorts marketplaces. Markets and

capitalism, as Braudel has shown, rely on totally opposite passions. More recently, David Graeber⁶ has reminded us of the close connection between army, debt, State, Money and markets, this age-old or rather empire-old combination that lies at the heart of the dual power of State and Market up to the present day.

Such a redistribution of the bounds between friends and strangers, internalities and externalities, what is close at hand and what is far away, defines an occupation of space-time against which societies, as Karl Polanyi would say, had always tried to protect themselves until the 18th century — and with some success. Such an age-old resistance has been broken by the haphazard concatenation of three elements, to stay within Polanyi's description: the steam engine that drastically increased the magnitude of production and thus made the space-time extension of Capital much greater; the technical model of self-regulation mechanisms (initially linked to the most mundane invention of Watt's centrifugal governor); and the irruption of a new discipline, that of economics, entirely devoted, as Michel Foucault has so powerfully shown, to convincing intruders to keep out of its inner workings. To which should be added the unexpected land grab of colonial empires, the indispensable expansion to other lands for the development of that which has no land of its own since it is a utopia anyway. An expansionary problem that is still with us today: how many planets do you need to develop, 2, 2.5, 4, or is it 5? Except there are no longer any colony outposts.

When you review this long history, it becomes clear that the history of economic thought is the history of the constant addition of *protective layers* to render it more and more impossible for intruders (read politicians and ordinary people) to meddle. Once protected from scrutiny it has all the contraptions of an alternate nature working automatically. This process of naturalization has been observed and denounced since Karl Marx. If it is easy to read in the figure of the "invisible hand" the hand of Providence, its meaning may be more trivially summarized by this warning addressed to all those who would like to put their hands in what concerns them most: "Keep your hands off!". What we are dealing with is supposed to be entirely natural, self-regulating, automated, and beyond anyone's command. With great success since in the 19th century nature was supposed to be the "red in tooth and claw" of Malthus projected back to natural history by Darwin on first nature before being dragged once again from first to second nature. The

⁶ David Graeber. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Melville House, 2011.

point here being that it was impossible and immoral to try limiting the miseries of the workers or saving the losers. Social Darwinism has since become our second nature.

What is really remarkable is that during the last two centuries the very notions of the two natures *have exchanged their properties*: first nature has entered the Anthropocene where it is hard to distinguish human action from natural forces and which is now full of tipping points, peaks, storms and catastrophes, while only second nature, it seems, has kept the older features of an indifferent, timeless and fully automatic nature governed by a few fundamental and undisputable laws totally foreign to politics and human action! And this nature has now become totally different from the old idea of social Darwinism. What does it mean to obey the “laws of the jungle” if it is Gaia that now threatens to take its revenge (as James Lovelock claims) and to get rid of capitalism entirely — and of the human race in addition! It seems that people are less keen on talking of the benefits of the “laws of the jungle”.

As Timothy Mitchell has recently argued in *Carbon Democracy*, just at the time the limits of first nature became apparent, that is around 1945, “The Economy” was invented once and for all—an infinite and boundless domain totally indifferent to terrestrial existence and the very notion of limits, and entirely self-centered and self-governed. Whereas before the war there still existed, in what was still called “political economy”, the idea of scarcity and allocation of rare goods, The Economy began to be entirely unmoored from any limitation. Dominique Pestre has shown that this process of unmooring, of infinitization, occurred once again in the 1970s, when the first report of the Club of Rome tried to bring first nature to bear on second nature.⁷ In a matter of a few years, limits had vanished and any connection between first and second nature had disappeared.

⁷ Pestre Knowledge and Rational Action The Economization of Environment, and After. “A possible explanation might be the move from the defense of the environment to an *economics* of environment; from environment per se to a theology of perfect markets; from a recognition of the necessity of choice to miraculous ‘instruments’ able to combine the impossible. The (understandable) privilege given to economic growth, coupled with the power of money in a deregulated world (despite the declaration of interest made by business in ecological modernization and sustainable development) allowed the digestion of most warnings, the quiet rewriting of most decisions. But strong belief in theory, notably mainstream economics, played its role in reassuring everybody that rational solutions were put into operation and that the planet would be saved.”

It is really at this time that Jameson's quip began to become realistic: the laws of capitalism became infinitely more durable, important, infinite, and let's use the word, more *transcendent* than those of geophysics and geobiology, those new sciences trying to catch up with the Anthropocene, that is, with human action. Karl Polanyi had called economics a "secular religion" to designate what had happened in the 19th century, and he was convinced, poor soul, that such a religion had been totally discredited when in 1949 he published *The Great Transformation*. How little could he have anticipated that such a religion would be so "greatly transformed" that it could finally realize its transcendent goal and reaching the Land of Milk and Honey once and for all at the end of the 20th century. At this date, when its last enemy, communism, had itself disappeared, The Economy reached its extraterrestrial status: unbound at last, unregulated, infinite.

It is also just then, such is the great irony of our time, that ecological mutations had finally begun warning everybody to be prepared for an even greater "great transformation" than what was expected. At this juncture, *the two natures had exchanged their roles for good*. If you want to get a glimpse of what could have been the idea of Nature in the 18th century, that is before the advent of the Anthropocene, read the *Wall Street Journal*! It is Capitalism now that appears to run like the older nature of the Holocene while first nature, the one in which we all live, offers now the highly complex, agitated, troubled and catastrophic portrait of science, morality, controversies and politics all mixed up. Historicity has changed camps: it is the Earth that is undergoing subversion at a dizzying pace and the Economy — that is, second nature—that still runs like clockwork. Funnily enough, now that it is Gaia who looks like a dangerous historical figure you no longer hear so much about Darwin and the benefits of the "struggle for life". That might be the reason why the same people who deny climate change don't believe in evolution either.

Those who try to understand the amazing extent of the War against the knowledge of climate mutations don't have to look very far: the now totally transcendent religion of the Economy has run up against the totally immanent science of the Earth. Economy has remained stuck in the Holocene. Mr. Tony Abbott, prime minister of Australia, is indeed right: not thinking ahead is the only rational solution... Denying the results of climate science has become the shibboleth telling friends from foes in our civil wars. But the key point is that the adjective "natural" has changed camps. This is

what pits ecology against The Economy: they are not dealing at all with the same nature. Which one will win over the other will determine our future.

Whenever there is a poison, there should be a search for a counter poison. How to find it? By looking at how capitalism, that is, thinking with the concept of capitalism, affects the thought. When they hear “capitalism” many people in our intellectual circles take it as a “*mot d’ordre*”, that is as a marching tune. But marching toward which front line?

Overthrowing capitalism does not seem to be a very good solution. It appears that capitalism enjoys being overthrown as long as it is attacked as a total system to be totally subverted. Because, quite naturally, the more systematic you are the surer you are to resist any attempt at being overthrown: that’s what a system is made for! It depends how you read the sad experience of the 20th century, but it seems to me that the net result of such an attempt at “revolutionizing Capitalism” (this should have been obvious since the start) has been a triumph of Capitalism and a fantastic increase in its systematic projection. In the search for total revolution, only the adjective “total” has remained, in the sense of total helplessness on the part of the losers and even more total totalitarianism on the part of the winners. As a concept distributing unbounded enthusiasm and absolute necessity with total indifference to long-term consequences, capitalism has been indistinguishable from its twin: communism. Which is not surprising since State and Market have been the two flanks of the same beast.

And still are. Actually, the new spectre that haunts Europe is not communism but what could be called the new “Chinese syndrome” according to which you could feel helpless in more ways than one: total lack of political freedom associated with the total domination by crony capitalism and total destruction of your lived environment; all of that in the name of radical modernization! When I hear that China shows the way to the future, I shudder even more than when I hear about Mr Abbott’s latest decision to cancel still another protection law.

Total revolution is a poison not a counter-poison. And a poison even more toxic when you draw from a century of failure the conclusion that you were right all the same even though you failed so drastically. That’s a pretty infectious thought since you deny that any experiments could change your mind. Failure should be allowed to make you learn something; it cannot be transmuted into the *inner comfort* of being right because you so miserably failed to escape from the grips of capitalism. Such indifference to experience

attacks the soul and has created this deserted political landscape we live in when those who call themselves the Left and even the radical Left are simultaneously sure of failing and sure of being right — yes being right in the sense of conniving happily with the Right in letting capitalism be even more systematic than it is. Like science, politics opens possibilities. It cannot be associated with failure and helplessness. If you have failed, it's not capitalism you should revolutionize but rather your ways of thinking. If you keep failing and don't change it does not mean you are facing an invincible monster, it means you like, you enjoy, you love, to be defeated by a monster. This is a case of psycho- or better, as Eric Voegelin would say, of *pneumopathology*, a form of spiritual masochism, not of courage.⁸ Yet the moral upper ground is still occupied by people who give lessons to the others from no other authority than having dismally failed to change anything.

We begin to see how difficult it is to disentangle the contradictory affects created by an appeal to the concept of capitalism: it generates a prodigious enthusiasm for seizing unbounded opportunities; a dystopian feeling of total helplessness for those who are submitted to its decrees; a complete disinhibition as to the long-term consequences of its action for those who profit from it; a perverse wound of smug superiority in those who have failed to fight its progression; a fascination for its iron laws in the eyes of those who claim to study its development, to the point that it appears to run more smoothly than nature itself; a total indifference to how the soil on which it is rooted is occupied; a complete confusion about who should be treated as a total stranger and who as a close neighbor. And above all, it marks a movement towards modernization that delegitimizes those who stay behind as so many losers. Actually now that capitalism is thought to have no enemy, it has become a mere synonym for the implacable thrust forward of modernization. From this tangle of effects, I get no other feeling than an increase sense of helplessness. The mere invocation of capitalism renders me speechless... It might be best to abandon the concept entirely.

You remember Hamlet's expression in Marx's 18th Brumaire: "Well done, old mole!" What sort of mole would dig down enough to subvert in the end not capitalism but some of the affects generated by this odd way to read history and to give an expression to our passions and indignations? Is there

⁸ Eric Voegelin. "The New Science of Politics, and Science." *Modernity without Restraint. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin. Volume 5: The Political Religions, The New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (edited by Manfred Henningsen). Ed. Henningsen, Manfred. Columbia and London: The University of Missouri Press, [1952] 2000.

an alternative? It appears that the solution will not come from dialectics with capitalists “digging their own grave” but from the first nature. It is ironic to think that so much saliva has been spent to save higher values from the risk of commodification when the question should rather have been to bring this whole enterprise down to earth. But which Earth? How to resist the transcendence of capitalism parading as immanence?

For the sake of time, let me phrase a possible alternative as a set of theses, and you will forgive me for listing eleven of them, using as a template the most famous list offered by Marx’s critique of Feuerbach.

For obvious reasons I will start from the last one, namely the 11th thesis:

Thesis 11: Economists have hitherto only *changed* the world in various ways, the point is now to *interpret* it.

Thesis 1: Economics and its associated retinue of skills and trades — accounting, marketing, design, merchandizing, business training, organization studies, management — do not make up a *science* that would be studying a material world, but a set of *disciplines* in charge of extracting from the social and natural world *another world* that would have remained transcendent without this violent act of performance.

Thesis 2: Economics, as a discipline, has helped format local forms of “market organizations” which are entirely mundane, makeshift affairs depending so much on culture, law, and geography that they should not, in any circumstances, be transformed into a “system” and especially not into a “natural” system. The word “law” in the “laws of economics” should be understood as in “civil laws”, that is as a highly revisable affair in the hands of a polity. Not as a law of a transcendent world in the hands of an invisible deity.

Thesis 3: To be radical a “radical critique” of an unfair, destructive and unsustainable “system” should abstain from falling into the trap of fighting a system. It is because it is not transcendent and because it obeys no superior laws that any “market organization” may spread and it is for the same reasons that it may be amended, modified, corrupted, reformed or reorganized. To be radical a critique should follow *the exact same paths* through which the extension of standards, templates or metrological chains occurs. As soon as it jumps to another superior level, it ceases to be radical — that is, close to the *roots* of the problem.

Thesis 4: If it is true that the word “economy” and the word “liberty” have been linked throughout history, then this liberty should be expanded — yes, radically expanded — to all the devices, experiments, instruments,

voting mechanisms, shares and stocks that constitute the makeshift, artificial and constantly reengineered armamentarium of the economy. Liberalism means “not letting anything go, not letting anything pass”.

Thesis 5: To be radical, that is, to be liberal, an interpretation of the working of economics and its “market organizations” should be of *this Earth*. No transcendent power, neither God nor Mammon, is at work in the economy. If it is true that economics inherits from the old “*oeconomia*” of the Greek Fathers, that is, the “*dispensatio*” by God the Creator, then it should inherit also all the qualities of such a providential plan, namely the suspension of fate, of slavery and domination and receive all the promises of salvation. It is blasphemous to use Providence to mean that the inflexible power of fate has been once again imposed upon the human race after it has been delivered from poverty.

Thesis 6: The transcendence of a world of beyond has been displaced in this world of below to the point that the spatial and time coordinates have been radically subverted. Space has become indifferent to place, soil and localities. Friends, commensals and allies have been treated as utter strangers. Future and past have been aligned on a sort of “inclined plane” as if the future was nothing but the repayment of the debts contracted in the past. Thus, transcendence has been turned into utopia. Hence the brutalism associated with so much modernization.

Thesis 7: There is a deep contradiction in the unleashing of the boundless possibilities of science and technology and, on the other hand, in the constant use, throughout the history of economic thought, of the “models of nature”. Newtonian physics, natural history, Darwinism, thermodynamics, cybernetics, immunology, computer, brain sciences—dozens of disciplines have each in turn been used as models for how economic forces are supposed to function. And each in turn has used economic theory to develop their concepts, to the point where “natural economics” has become an oxymoron. But if first and second nature have constantly exchanged their concepts, so far it has always been to render the necessities of economic fate even more indisputable. Ecologizing economics cannot mean a new appeal to nature to make sure that even more people are absent from the automatic working of the “cycles of nature”. On the contrary, such ecologizing is a way to repopulate the scene that has been emptied.

Thesis 8: The wide expansion of the reach of “market organizations” along metrological chains has created a global domain of transcendent

reality — second nature — that is now clashing with another mundane, immanent globe, that of planet Earth, namely Gaia, that is different from nature since it has its own historicity, reactivity, maybe sensitivity, and certainly power. The new fight between the two globes defines our time. Back to Earth your Earthlings!

Thesis 9: There is nothing native, aboriginal, eternal, natural, transcendent in the habits that have been framed during the few centuries “market organizations” have exercised their global reach. No feature of *Homo oeconomicus* is very old: its subjectivity, its calculative skills, its cognitive abilities, its sets of passions and interests are recent historical creations just as much as the “goods” they are supposed to buy, to sell and to enjoy, and just as much as the vast urban and industrial infrastructure in which they have learned to survive. What has been made so quickly can be unmade just as quickly. What has been designed may be redesigned. There is not fate in the vast landscape of inequalities we associate with the economy and their unequal distribution of “goods” and “bads”, only a slowly built set of irreversibilities. Now that historicity has shifted from the *stage* to the *backstage* of human action — namely, from second to first nature — activists should ally themselves with the globe against the global.

Thesis 10: What is true in Jameson’s sentence is that there is something infinite in capitalism in the technical sense of having *no limit* in time and space and also no end in the sense of a goal or a “telos”. As Marx had demonstrated long ago, capitalism is *unlimited* because of the cycle that defines its extension (MAM). A form of life that cannot think its end — either in space or in time — does not deserve to be respected any more than a human who does not consider itself as mortal. It is in that sense that the apocalyptic tone used to salute the reemergence of first nature should be welcomed. It helps thinking that the end of capitalism is much more realistic than the end of the world.

I hope you will have forgiven the emphatic tone with which I have delivered those 11 theses. I simply wanted to emphasize the new twist recent history has put on Valery’s famous sentence: “We civilizations now know ourselves mortal”: “We nature, or rather Gaia, now know ourselves mortal”. There is something deeply unsettling in Jameson’s quip. But now that historicity has moved to first nature, there is a chance, probably a very small one, to be a civilization again, that is, a state of affairs that cultivates its own finitude. The other solution, unfortunately the most probable, is that capitalism in its

hyper- or more exactly terminally- modern form takes Jameson's argument literally and decides that the passing and transitory Earth should be entirely mastered through geoengineering in the most hubristic form of domination.⁹ In this case, since indeed the world does not possess the qualification for being a bank, "they will not bail it out."

⁹ [1] Clive Hamilton. *Earthmasters. The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.