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The Exterminating Angel

1. The machine

The device presented under the title Chaos machine is complex. There is no intention here towards analysing all its aspects, I only retain the most striking one: money is exchanged for money, but this exchange, if we can say so, has a particular price here, because «real» money is destroyed, burned, and it is at this cost that we can obtain a bit of «virtual» money. But it is precisely through this destruction that what should give rise to a currency conversion reveals something else.

Lacan recalled that, wherever we seek to conceive a causal relationship, if we look closely, a gap is revealed, a hiatus between the terms supposedly joined by this causal relationship. Here, it is first of all this gap which is shown to us. As what we see are two events disconnected from each other: a bill that burns, a code that appears.

Why are they disconnected? First, because the operation is indifferent to the value destroyed: whether you enter a 10, 100 or 500 euro note, you will obtain the same type of code giving strictly the same possibility for all users of the machine. Secondly, because there is no necessary connection between the physical destruction of the banknote and the generation of a «chaos coin». Destruction can of course symbolize, as the designers of the machine indicate, the exchange of one type of currency to another; but it is also essential to note that it appears as a fundamentally arbitrary element. Yet arbitrariness is the mark of sovereign authority.

I will come back to this point a little later, but we can immediately notice that what is made visible in the consumption of the banknote is what, as citizens, we do not have the power to do: destroy the currency. But what is also visible here is that the designers of the machine have taken this power. They don't have that power, but they take it anyway. No one has given them the authority to do so; but that does not prevent them from implementing the capacity to do so - two meanings of «power» are therefore in conflict here.



2. The value

Let us return to this point: the consumption of banknotes. What is striking above all in this device is the spectacle of the destruction of what does not exist. One would say: a bill is something that exists. Yes, but what it represents, on the other hand, does not exist. A banknote has a material existence, but it holds its value only to represent something else through that existence. It holds its value to be the representative of value.

We have learned that value is what can be measured and, therefore, provides a basis for the transactions that drive economic life. It is because there is something such as value, it is said, that we can refer to a common measure of what is likely to be traded.

Some economists remind us, however, that it is not because value is presumed that it exists. That the existence of value is presumed, that all the interactions that we call economic interactions are based on this presumption does not guarantee that it is valid. Let us be clear: that it exists other than as a pure object of shared trust, trust in the fact that money, whatever it is, represents something on which we can agree - and that it matters, in essence, what that «something» can be. The «fiduciary» note is the material symbol of a common trust, the symbol of what binds a community together through shared trust. But this trust has no other real object than itself: it is because all the others place their trust in this strange object, the banknote (or the crypto-currency unit) that I too can trust. I trust the trust of others. It is only in this way, only as trust that refers only to itself, that value «exists».

Which might as well be said in the following way: value, as the object to which common trust in what money represents is supposed to refer, is nothing, it does not exist. It could be that the false conversion operation of the Chaos machine, the non-causal relationship between the burnt banknote and the «chaos-coin» generated is the revelation of this non-existence. According to this hypothesis, the fact that the banknote can and is burnt reminds us that it is the representation of a «thing» that does not exist.

The function of money is therefore by no means a function of representation. Its own operation is to carry out what could be called a community (communal?) stitch: a stitch point, or a padding point, to which clings a founding

community trust, a trust that pretends to refer to a non-existent object in order to be better able to refer only to itself. Behind the bill that is consumed, there is nothing - literally, and what is made visible here is above all nothingness.

3. Power

We will not forget that the nothing is the discovery of the political philosophy of the seventeenth century. Let us be clear: nothing which alone is capable of constituting the basis of political power.

We know that this paradox was developed by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* in response to the great intellectual and institutional destabilization that followed the English Revolution. Sovereign power, Hobbes tells us, does not come from God, it is not the fruit of supernatural power; it is the result of artifice, of fiction. This fiction is that of the representation of the people. The sovereign is not God's chosen one or his image on earth, but the representative of the people. But what is «the people»? The people is nothing; that is, the people do not exist, as such, as long as they are not represented. It is this absence of a people prior to the representation of the people, this absence of the capacity of the people to be a people without sovereign mediation, which is at the heart of Thomas Hobbes' theoretical device. It is this «nothing» of the people without the sovereign, and not the fullness of a God, that forms the basis of sovereign power.

One could say, to summarize, that it is because there is no basis for sovereign authority that it can be legitimized. Over the centuries, we have had fun developing and multiplying the effects of this paradox. It would be wrong to believe that it concerns only the speculative policy of philosophers. In reality, it speaks to us of a reality that most closely concerns our time, and in particular, the contemporary form of power. This contemporary form is the set of imperatives that drive the organization of what we have become accustomed to call the «economy». The economy is by no means an autonomous level of reality, as some economists still dream of. Since the beginning of the last century, as historian Eric Hobsbawm recalls in his «brief twentieth century» history, politics and economics have completed their fusion. This means that it is the economy itself that has become a policy, a globalized policy, that imposes its demands on the entire planet.



No wonder, then, that the same applies to the economy as to the sovereign authority conceived by philosophers: it is legitimized only by the fact that at the very basis of the authority it exercises over peoples and their leaders, there is nothing - one should therefore say - *it* is nothing. The whole economy is also based on a fiction that places the representation of nothing at its centre.

We saw it a little higher, this «nothing», in this case, is that of value. The value, it is what each one can refer to as what all the others refer to, but which is nothing out of this reference. The ultimate reason for economic activities is a void of reason, and a void of existence. The paradox of sovereignty plays itself out well here: it is because there is nothing at the basis of social activities, and in particular nothing transcendent, that economic imperatives, at the centre of which are the forms of money, are accepted as the rules of our lives.

The subjects of the economy that we are all to varying degrees resemble well, in this sense, the characters of Luis Buñuel's film, *The Exterminating Angel*. They meet for a social evening, but instead of separating at the right time, at a time in which social conventions are still respected, they stay together and end up falling asleep. The next day, it is impossible for them to leave the room in which they have gathered. There is nothing that prevents them from going out, no material obstacle, nothing visible, nothing tangible; there is only an immaterial partition, a non-existent wall, that holds them back. It is equally impossible for outsiders to reach them.

The Chaos machine shares an essential element with Buñuel's film: it is about making the nothing visible as such. Not just any nothing, if we can say so, but the nothing that is at the root of the provisions that make, for better or for worse, the existence of our societies. The immaterial partition of Buñuel's film resembles the value presumed to be represented by the note: in a way, everyone knows that neither the partition nor value exists. At least neither of them exists apart from the projection that each one makes of what each other is supposed to have projected equally. What separates Buñuel's characters from the outside and thus makes them a makeshift community is nothing more than the reciprocal assumption, made by each person, of the impossibility of crossing a threshold (chasm?). What binds together the members of the economic community is that each assumes that the other will have projected, into the void designated by a coin, the same thing - namely, in the end, nothing more than this very assumption.

The Chaos machine exhibits the nothing. The aim is to show what the transactions that guide our lives are made of, to make visible the background on which they operate. It is not about celebrating the change from one type of currency to another. The new currency necessarily reproduces, for the most part, the aberrations of the previous one. Its main merit, however, is that it is more open about what is nothing to the principle of social interaction.

What is imposed with the force of necessity is in reality perfectly contingent - and this is true of the «laws» of economics as well as the immaterial partition that holds Buñuel's characters prisoners. The visibility of the «founding» nothing is the visibility of a contingency and what we can do of, or with, this contingency.

This is why it is essential to keep in mind the second sense of «power», namely the capacity a community gives itself to do something of what it has managed to make visible. What is made visible is not always, however, easily made available. But it is a matter of facing, in this case, a radical contingency masked by the mirages of a false necessity. A contingency that, in a way, could become the basis of a new type of sharing, and of a new meaning given to what trust in the trust of others could be.

Traduction Daniel Shavit, September 2018