

THE ANXIOUS PROP

THE PARAMETRICS OF WALKING AT SUPERSONIC SPEEDS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BLACK SWAN ISSUE

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I dreamt the other night that I was living inside the Arctic ice cap, my mascot was a yeti. Of course, very tall, my yeti had the power to walk supersonically through ice. Me and a crew of Hells Angels would follow. Does this dream mean that war will soon break out between Norway and Russia? Maybe. But it is not so difficult to imagine this unlikely conflict. Walking at supersonic speed, well, that is an entirely different matter.

It is that different, metaphorical matter that incites a review of the recent popularization of the Black Swan effect by economist Nassim Taleb in his best-seller *The Black Swan*. Taleb's triple layered model for identifying Black Swans, being "rarity, extreme impact, and retrospective (though not prospective) predictability" is what this issue of *The Anxious Prop* wants to distance itself from, while simultaneously be informed by.¹ While we are willing to concede, albeit reluctantly, that his theory may hold up only in the characterization of "low predictability and large impact" in regards to financial crises, we are quite skeptical about extending it to historical events.²

Taleb's model is the source of our distrust, simply because it is yet another tool of capitalism that is wide-open to distortion, most explicitly by the author himself. The weakness of the model lies in its third layer, which he expands to not only unexpected events, but further to the non-occurrence of expected events. To structure this third layer of his Black Swan identification model, he cites a range of natural disasters and unexpected landmarks of innovation such as the creation of the Internet, while turning to those of a "historical" nature, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, revolution in Iran, etc. Most predictable is Taleb's instrumentalization of September 11, 2001 as a Black Swan. And so, whether by trigger-happy presidents or dynamite-strapped

pawns, the use of 9/11 (willingly or by proxy, as fact or as conspiracy) to manipulate and shape politics is an example of what is of concern here. Meaning that, by elucidating on our "need" to hone our senses to benefit from the unpredictable, Taleb unwittingly formulates an oppositional blueprint for a willingness to wager on the demise of others as a method of profit.

These methods of profit, guided by the faith on financial models and the transgressive expansion of the global market, clearly makes even First World, stable nations like Iceland and Greece prone to the whim of predatory profiteering. These methods now gain exponential acceleration as the demise of natural resources also grows as a variable (if dependable) instrument.

Taleb's statement, "Black Swan logic makes what you don't know far more relevant than what you do know," sounds uncomfortably close to a Diesel Jeans campaign, or better surmised as "ignorance is bliss," no matter how intellectually loaded his position might be.³ This is how Taleb's Black Swan turns into an evading metaphor. The elegant, poetic topology we believe the Black Swan has provided for hundreds of years—as the emblem of a sublime improbability, as a ghost in the machine—is lost. This is not a nostalgic, pastoral truism, but a reminder that human agency plays a definable role upon historical events, and that the metrics of models, not as Jon Elster would argue through mechanical determinism, but more in tune with the parametric determinism of Ernest Mandel,⁴ which is what opens that greater, poetic malleability of life. It is Mandel's model of parametrics that becomes more compelling for it engages both the dialectic of the paradox and the synesthesia of the metaphor. As for this instance, these conditions speak of the two queries operating here: the matter of models and the matter of human agency.

Therefore, if we are going to prepare for something, it should not be to recognize exploited countries, rigged elections, car bombs, oil spills, airplane hijacks, terrorism or state sponsored terrorism, as Black Swans these are not. And to spectacularize inventions? Well, yes, it is exciting to know that exploration has provided unexpected tools and life-saving solutions. But, do I think that the absence of jetpacks, space stations, or summer homes on the moon are to be Black Swans as Taleb's model would suggest, especially if it potentially meant to instead deal with predictable problems here on Earth? No thanks, I do not agree, and I am fine without them.

In the end, the reason why the Black Swan-as-metaphor is so powerful, is not necessarily its relationship to what we cannot predict but certainly what we cannot control: volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, love, luck, and melancholy. To rest on our preparation to capitalize on the unknown seems like yet another anesthetic continuance of the passive suicide of unregulated globalized market charlatanism.

To engage in the scientific understanding of why human agency is creating shifts in atmospheric phenomena, oceanographic behavior, on human health and/or social justice does continue to be necessary. But so is the celebration of those other considered esoteric practices that lubricate the flow of information between the numbers and letters, between space and dreams.

We are therefore interested in the admission that Alain Badiou recently stated:

I remain convinced that every philosophy that eliminates the category of the subject becomes unable to serve a political process. That is not to say that a subject should be identified from the outset as the working class or the like. Certainly, there is subjectivity in politics and there is subjectivity in art and subjectivity in love and subjectivity in science itself. As such, I attempted to completely rethink the relation between formalization and subjectivity.⁵

It is with this in mind that you will find written contributions by our friends and colleagues Ross Adams, Hillary Brown (who incited this issue in the first place), Jean Gardner, Mark Jarzombek, Dan Paluska, Paul Ryan, and Walter Mercado. You will also find

related visual works recently produced by François Bucher, Pia Marais, and Hannes Schmidt, and contributions from within the collective by Morgan Belenguer, Elín Hansdóttir, Mendel Heit, Miodrag Kuć, Urbikon, and yours truly.

I leave you by answering two questions posed by the Madrid-based group Ludotek:⁶ "Have you felt powerful? Was it at someone else's expense?" Meaning, will I invest in betting for a war between Norway and Russia? No. "Have you felt powerful? Was it with someone else's expense?" Meaning, will I invest in finding out how to walk at supersonic speeds? Absolutely.

¹ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), xviii.

² Ibid.

³ Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, xix.

⁴ Ernest Mandel, "How To Make No Sense of Marx," *Analyzing Marxism: New essays on Analytical Marxism*, ed. Robert Ware and Kai Nielsen (Calgary: The University of Calgary Press, 1989), 105–132.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Concept of the Model: An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, trans. by Zachary Luke Fraser and Tzuchien Tho (Melbourne: re.press, 2007), 88.

⁶ Manuela Zechner, Paz Rojo, and Anja Kanngieser, eds., *Vocabularies* (Amsterdam: Association LISA, 2008), 43.