

POSITION OF THE PROBLEM. Paris, 13 November 2015, two weeks before the opening of the COP21 climate conference: suddenly we find ourselves between two suicidal paths. Militants who believe they are doing something of religious and political relevance commit in cold blood a senseless act that has not the least strategic importance and bears no known relation to religious traditions. As if their destiny and the destinies of those whom they have snatched in their bloody, moronic flight had been completely caught up in the attraction of the great beyond. The last thing desolated citizens should do is try to find meaning in an act of nihilism that has no meaning.

“Senseless”: this is exactly how it should be characterized.

But this happens just two weeks before another event, when, on 30 November 2015, the people of the world try to obstruct another, much larger, suicidal path, another senseless movement sucked in by the empty domain of the great beyond: the “future,” that land of nowhere in the name of which the modernizing frontier seems ready to swallow humans and nonhumans alike, plunging all of them into the midst of a general destruction of the conditions fit for life. This development too is senseless. This too is suicidal. This too is nihilism in action.

Such is our zeitgeist: on the one hand, religious wars for the colonization of a nonexistent afterworld; on the other, economic wars for the colonization of territories that are equally insubstantial. Two situations deeply linked by some strange politico-religious urge to “replace” the world as it is with another world that is transcendent as an ideal yet totally deadly when violently inserted into the world of below. Two forms of criminal intoxication by the beyond that make it impossible for ordinary humans to get back to earth, to become earthly; as if it were impossible to render religion, politics, science, and economics secular again, material, mundane.

So the question for us becomes that of understanding why humans touched by hypermodernism have so much difficulty taking seriously that they are of this earth and thus must stay inside the boundaries they keep pushing beyond. How is it they are able to sacrifice everything to the world of beyond? Through what extraordinarily perverse mechanism has transcendence been transformed into the abandonment and condemnation of this world? Modernists seem to keep their eyes turned toward some extraterrestrial land, a land where they could not live anyway, even if by an extraordinary miracle of history they could actually reach it. What is the odd political theology of modernism?

And the tragic thing is that those people who expect a miracle, their faces turned beyond earth, are precisely those who have, for several centuries, debunked all the

Introduction

LET'S TOUCH BASE!

seen people unable to move, to feel with their hands, to talk face to face with one another when puzzled by some state of affairs? In any real situation of collective exploration, normal human beings would have discovered in an instant that those shadows on the wall were nothing but a tricky projection from some clever puppeteers. Such a vision of humanity before it has seen the light outside can only come to someone with a sinister project of emancipation. Humans never sit still like this, silent and in awe, watching shadows. Only a sadistic professor would chain pupils this way so as to have the pleasure of unchaining them later – or to enjoy the masochistic delight of being mistreated by them.

At no point in this “out of the cave and into the great outdoors” fable does the hapless Glaucon protest against such a farce – not even when the emancipated prisoner, having broken his chains and abandoned his fellow cavemen, begins to ascend the stairs of this odd panoramic cinema and slowly accustoms his eyes to the new light, first by looking at his reflection in puddles, then at the moon and stars, and then straight at the sun, not merely as “reflections in water... but as it is in itself” (242). We might expect Glaucon to interject: “But Socrates, the poor fellow will burn his eyes! Stop him before he commits such folly!” But no, when Socrates suggests that the former caveman will come to see the sun as the cause of everything visible: “That is the conclusion which he would obviously reach” (243).

After that, the sad story that we have been asked to admire so much unfolds further: the philosopher returns to the cave (out of what evangelical zeal we are never told) to help his former fellow prisoners get outdoors, in response to which the recalcitrant morons put him to death – not, however, before they have had time to diagnose, quite accurately, that “his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting” (243). How right they are on that score! The whole story is a complete folly from beginning to end. Folly to imagine that humans could be imprisoned in the dark, watching nothing but shadows; folly to imagine that there is some outdoors in view of the sun where some heroic fellow would have unmediated access to the true and the good.

There is something quite strange in this story that is not always highlighted: the protagonists are radically divided by the epistemological break between two entirely different ways of obtaining the truth about matters of fact. Actually, to this day it is this break that explains why it is so difficult to heed the lessons daily experience teaches us about what it means to inhabit the planet. The fictitious prisoners, remember, have no other way to deal with things than to “remember the order of sequence among the passing shadows” in order to “divine their future appearances” (243). In other words, cavemen have nothing to

[1] On this book's cover, see Marzotto and Sambonet (r·m!42–49)

I told you this was a bad start. Instead of giving us, as promised, a parable on “the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition” (Plato 241), Socrates has trapped us in the dark about the chiaroscuro way of sharing our experience and collectively checking how reliable it is. Those who proudly say “We need no image of any sort to get to the truth” are readying themselves to commit crimes in the name of enlightenment. And does it really matter if they do it in the name of Allah, Jesus, science, reason, or the market? What counts is the way they preach, ignore opposition, and ready themselves to kill. The prisoners, who have been blind from birth, who could have learned to grope in the dark, are being deceived by voluntarily blinded activists turned philosophers.

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DIGGING A CROSS SECTION

THERE IS, HOWEVER, another interpretation of this sad origin myth. It is not impossible that the allegory of the cave was written for an innocent Athenian audience easing themselves onto the marble seats of a theater to watch a good comedy, ready to laugh at some buffoonery; or perhaps it's a tragicomedy involving an odd vision of the process of enlightenment taken as a serious description of how cavemen should become philosophers. To interpret it that way, it is enough to remember that Plato is a master artist and a most subtle puppeteer in his own right, a playwright of great renown. As any contemporary playwright could immediately recognize, the story told by Socrates to Glaucon is not a parable about the heroic emancipation and death of a Christlike figure, but an entirely different drama staging the relations between ground and underground, a great experiment in redistributing light, darkness, projections, and shadows.

To get it, you have to add to the audience of fake prisoners the “real” audience in front of which Socrates and Glaucon are talking. The spectators implied by the narrative are seated in such a way that they see every part of the whole stage set simultaneously: the prisoners left in their cinema, the actors holding the puppets in front of a powerful fire, the brightly lit zone above ground, and the fake sun above the scene.

In effect, Plato is presenting on stage something that resembles what you see in natural history museums: a cutout anthill, or a geological cross section of layers of sediment. And now we, the real public of that tale, discover the whole cleverly drawn stratagem. Seen in this way, the ascent and descent follow a different plot: if the projected screen of the cinema where actors play at being prisoners is a fiction, so is the impression of an outdoors created by spotlights and the heroic story of the emancipated philosopher.

be obtained without any image, while for the second audience, without the image there is no idea whatsoever. It is at this point that the public realizes that the whole story of enlightenment is exactly that: a story, a distraction, the sort of spectacle you take your kids to before going back to the real world. A fiction? No, a fiction doubling as a fictitious account of what a fiction is! What we should be taking away from this most famous dialogue is its double and contradictory moral.

Is it our fault if the moderns "speak with a forked tongue"? They have always projected a double narrative: one of emancipation and one of attachment. Iconoclasts put everybody in a double bind. When one says, "Down with all images so that we can more quickly reach the true, the good, and the beautiful," the other says, "Never will you reach the true, the good, and the beautiful without multiplying images, models, fictions, fabrications, and fables" (Latour, "What Is Iconoclasm?"). Is it any surprise, then, that young people, unaware of this long, contradictory tradition, become intoxicated by the first ideal and see in the mundane reality of ordinary images nothing but a world to be destroyed? After a bout of iconoclasm, the next step is the assassination of those who are accused of worshipping shadows. So many tears shed for the twice-ruined splendor of Palmyra, "the irreplaceable treasure" (Veyne). So many tears for the mass killings of "infidels." So many tears for the wanton destruction of soils "developed" into desert. How might modernism learn to make sense of its contradictory traditions?

A PROVINCIAL IDEA OF UNIVERSAL EXTENT

YOU MIGHT OBJECT that if the moderns' view of the outside and the beyond is odd, at least they have triumphed in the clear and distinct idea of what the real world consists of, the world of below. Is it not well known that they pride themselves on the solidity, coherence, and efficacy of their materialism? But the tragedy of their history is that the two worlds are linked in such a way that misunderstanding the transcendent world of beyond means risking an equivalent misunderstanding of the immanent world of "mere matters of fact." If priests and preachers have never succeeded in convincing the many cultures they have invaded to turn their eyes upward, scientists and engineers have not succeeded any better in convincing the many cultures they have colonized to live "down below." The oddity of the down is just as great as the oddity of the up. Or more exactly, just as the experience of transcendence was distorted by the allegory of the cave, the experience of immanence has been strangely hidden behind the myth of a "scientific worldview."

As proof that when moderns express their experience of matter, the result is no better than when they try to record their experience of the immaterial,

This other movement would require us to travel from the astronomer's telescope to the physiologist's laboratory to the great accelerator of the particle physicist, knocking at the doors of many unconnected institutions and learning the skills of the many incompatible trades involved, without omitting the leisurely moment when we would see the reporter chat with the picnickers.

But in following the movements of such a traveling character we would never have left the solid ground of Chicago! The discontinuities between so many different disciplines would not have been erased. The complexity of learning each instrument's true extension would not have been papered over. Each image would have to have been selected from many visual traces. The decision as to which was the right one to focus on would have been shown, and so would the face of the bewildered reporter unable to detect exactly what most of the images mean. Discontinuities would show up everywhere. No one would imagine that everything is made of the same stuff, namely abstract space. The confusion over how we know and what we know would not be so easy to sustain. Materialities would be shown to be clearly different from matter.

Perhaps we have not moved much since the time of the allegory of the cave, even though we are supposed to have gone from an idealistic to a materialistic worldview. Here again, what is supposed to draw the true portrait of the world offers a totally unrealistic vision of that in which we are supposed to reside. What was so implausible in the allegory was the idea of chained prisoners stripped of all their collective cognitive skills and reduced to calculating the passing of shadows. What is impossible in the "scientific" worldview (but attempted nevertheless) is the erasure of all the discontinuous and heterogeneous ways in which many groups of competing scientists are trying to make sense of the world. The continuity of the composition is simply given by the camera, zooming from the very big to the very small and back.

Just as Descartes confused *res extensa* with drawings on paper (Ivins), the chained prisoners forced to watch *Powers of Ten* are asked to believe that they reside in that world – a world of shadows! Once again the act of enlightening the masses generates obscurantism. The material world of those who wish to stick to matters of fact is even more fictional than the outside the philosopher was asking us to reach in order to escape from a world of shadows.

No wonder it is so difficult for those who inherit those two models to find their bearings. The scenography of the outside is just as misleading as the great panorama of the inside. The up is just as fictional as the down. When you are requested to turn your eyes to the higher ground, you are asked to go to the place of nowhere, but when you are asked to cast your gaze downward, that place does not exist either. We are stuck between two utopias. What does it mean to be "earthly" if

continuous time and space, while on the other we realize that such a provincial view leaves room for a much more interesting story of science and objectivity; on one side we are given a view of the globe, on the other we are on foot with the localizers.

And at the junction of each of these dual stories we reach an impasse, a moment of puzzlement, perhaps of abandonment: how can we have both? It is a sort of gestalt switch. In one we are moderns (happy or sad to be so); in the other we have never been moderns. In one we are breaking with the other collectives; in the other we are suddenly faced with them and obliged to raise again all the questions of anthropology. The others are no longer others. We are all driven by the same tragedy, trying to get our bearings, entering into a new sort of diplomatic encounter, what we call the middle ground (Latour, "Procedure 7," *r·m!* 405–19).

What do you do when you are disoriented – for instance, when the digital compass of your mobile phone goes wild? You reset it (Ricci, *r·m!* 24–41). You might be in a state of mild panic because you have lost your bearings, but still you have to take your time and follow the instructions to recalibrate the compass and let it be reset. The procedure depends on the situation and the device, but you always have to be patient, remain calm, and follow some instructions if you want the compass to regain its ability to receive the signals sent by the arrays of satellites dispersed in the sky, far above your head.

Such is the metaphor we have chosen for our enterprise. As if we wanted to offer the moderns a quiet space where they can reset their instruments and detect a signal again. It turns out that what we are supposed to experience has become increasingly difficult to register because of this strange opposition between a beyond and a below, both scrambled. Yes, it is a darker space than the brightly lit one. Yes, it is much more interior, inferior, mundane, and delicate than both the world of the great outside and the world of the great inside. But remember, no one has ever lived outside, no more than you can breathe in outer space without a space suit, and no one has lived in the cave either. How strange that such a technology-driven civilization remains so unpracticed at calibrating its instruments to detect where it resides and how it can survive. We need all the intelligence, all the skills we have, to develop the right detectors, to place the right sensors, to triangulate the right arrays of instruments. Nothing spectacular, no hype, no grand narrative, no bright future, no new agent of history, but rather a set of simple resetting protocols, just a series of seven procedures – to see where it leads, what it allows, what it permits us to document.

This publication and the exhibition to which it is linked attempt to pursue the work of documentation and instrumentation started with the *AIME* project (An Inquiry into Modes of Existence), the goal of which is to pluralize the templates with which experience may be recorded (Latour *Inquiry*; Latour, *AIME*). What was

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