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An Ontology of Filtering

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We are filters, each one of us and all together. What comes *to us*, from the future, is therefore to a great extent what comes *from us*, from what we carry from our tradition: what we've let pass *through us*.

In a world that has been so profoundly (re)structured by the imperative to *laisser-faire* and to *laisser-passer*, formalized by Gournay and Turgot in the mid-eighteenth century, our essence is defined as much by what we *block* and as it is by what we *transport*. There are at least *three imaginary models* we can use to conceive of our power to act in the contemporary world; models that all, moreover, strongly erode the very notion of (political) *action*.

The first model is that of the *fishing net* (or more generally, the capturing device). In terms of what comes towards it, every being strives to catch what might feed its future. For a while now, "capitalism" has been correctly defined as a capturing device, one that only generates exchange flows in order to skim the foam of profit that forms at the surface. This model is that of the fisherman, but also of the pirate as well as, paradoxically, the free rider. Whether we travel without a (full price) ticket, or whether we sack the ocean floor or the neighboring boats, the operation is the same in the end: in all three cases, we are surfing on the riches produced by others, feeding ourselves by catching profits we do not ourselves generate.

A political gesture is typical of the situation produced by this first model: claiming a larger portion of the booty. This is what the working class did, successfully, after having read the description of the capitalist capturing device proposed by Marx: the workings of human labor produce a foam of profit (surplus-value), with different classes fighting over its *appropriation*. What comes to us appears to be the result of what we *do* (with our available work time). Each person's status is defined by what he is able to seize from what our working together yields. "Working more" does indeed allow one, in certain cases, "to earn more," which is posited as everyone's goal: conflicts stem from the fact that those who work (the most) are not necessarily those who earn (the most).

The second model is that of the *sewage treatment facility*. This also involves filtering flows. However, the challenge is no longer to appropriate for oneself what is most precious to feed our existence, but rather to eliminate the potentially harmful residue. In terms of what comes to us in the present, we all strive to *block* the circulation and reproduction of what seems to threaten our future. What civilizations have always categorized as "morality" has no other purpose: preventing what is deemed rightly or wrongly as a poison to the social body, to pass. The core of ("superficial") ecology shares

this same purpose: blocking the reproductive circulation of what harms our vital situation. From the rectification of words in Ancient China, up through “political correctness” on American campuses, through the purification of the French language in the seventeenth century, the same concern for linguistic ecology occupies human societies: not allowing what might pollute the relational atmosphere to pass through our mouths.

We can clearly sense how this second model differs from the first. Although a sewage treatment plant does “produce” something, it is, truth be told, shit: one no longer strives to capture what is most precious in the flux that is filtered, but to capture the worst part of what should not be allowed to circulate further. This cleaning work is the complete opposite of appropriation: I’m only gathering the foam floating on the surface of polluted waters in order to reject it more cleanly. The challenge is not, in this case, to produce (or to earn) more, but to intoxicate (oneself) less. It is symptomatic, in this regard, that the recent financial crisis was considered in terms of toxicity: the subprimes and other financial securities were “toxic assets” because the filters meant to function at the level of lending banks had been weakened or abolished by deregulation.

It is certainly an inextricably linked combination of hygienism, ethical asceticism and political ecology that defines the ideal of *watchfulness* emanating from this second model. We are all called upon to *watch* what and who is coming, so as to *watch over* the preservation of what will come tomorrow to feed the waters in which we are all immersed. The constant effort of attention required by this watchfulness contributes perhaps to a certain sadness of our times – a sadness that is no doubt due also to the way we envision our being in accordance with the unflattering shit-filter model. Our mode of “action” seems to only be *negative*: preventing the junk that’s everywhere from going through us. It comes as no surprise that boycotting is the reigning form of this negative activism: *do not buy* (such a product or such a brand that relies on neo-slavery modes of exploitation, that obscenely pollutes a country, that supports oppressive governments or that maintains discriminatory employment policies). Of course, such negativity could easily be reversed: there is an entire green consumer culture eager to transform our refusal to buy into desires to spend “green” (buying “organic”, buying “fair trade”, buying “sustainable”, buying “local”).

Between those who are most easily converted into green consumers and those who retreat into new asceticism, a similar gesture is at work, although it is modulated at unequal intensity: a gesture of *rejecting datas* (literally: “givens”) – a gesture whose mythical dimension was cleverly captured by the cartoon *Spirited Away*). This gesture apparently takes an external form: what comes to me (through supermarkets, television, advertising), *I don’t want, I can’t take no more*. I reject these data, these givens. At best, I want something else. At worst, I will stop (over)eating, I’ll put myself on a steady diet of nothing. In the extreme, I’ll vomit, I’ll make myself vomit, and I will be consumed as a martyr of deadly emaciation. As these most dramatic forms reveal, this rejection of givens is mostly *a battle with and against oneself*.

For one is only very partially *born* as a filter: one is mostly required to *become* one. That is, to constantly alter our filtering criteria. One is never either purifying or purified enough. That which, from the outside, comes across as a rejection of external givens presupposes indeed a rejection of the inner criteria which defines our filtering

activity. The enemy is within the place: it is my receptivity (which makes me gulp down what is shoved down), it is my sensibility (which makes me desire what harms us), but it is also, symmetrically, my insensibility towards what should attract me spontaneously. In short, the enemy is the filter that I am, in its unsuitability and delay with regard to what should have been blocked a long time ago. Every treatment plant, every anti-terrorist act, every anti-virus and anti-spam software fatally comes one war too late, insofar as they are *reactive* measures: they attempt to remedy a problem after the fact, a problem that has to first *come into being* before it can *be prevented*. What I do (to protect us) at first misses the new toxicities in what is coming. We might torture millions of lab animals (without really needing to, in the great majority of cases), but we can only anticipate a tiny portion of the “risks” generated randomly by the increasingly unpredictable re-combinations of our increasingly complex lifestyles.

This built-in delay of the filtering device with regard to the filtering needs similarly characterizes the first two models envisioned up to this point: just as our treatment plants are totally ill-suited for eliminating junk the size of a nanotube, there are many fishing nets that are bound to miss the most precious stuff we would like to catch. It is the well-known paradox of any form of evaluation of research or artistic practices: the “new” that one strives to locate (in order to skim off the most profitable cream, separating it from the milk of already shared practices), by definition escapes all filters, since its essential virtue is to establish *new* filtering criteria that are still unknown (a new “paradigm,” a new sensibility). The models of the treatment plant and of the fishing net are therefore animated by the constant (and potentially exhausting) need for a *self-revolution of filters*.

The political struggles here focus on questions of *temporality* (too early, too late, too fast, too slow). Institutions (like human beings) survive only by resisting the permanent revolution of the universe’s molecular chaos thanks to their own, heavy and massive inertia. And yet, institutions must be able to adapt to the inevitable transformations of their external conditions and of their own parts. It is the persistence of filters in time that secures the identity of beings; it is their capacity to self-modulate that secures their survival and their prosperity. The banality of these general truths underscores the nature of the basic problem: in the constantly changing flux of what is coming, the vital question is to determine *at what moment* and *at what rhythm* filters must evolve, in order to at once avoid (a) dissolving all stable identity, (b) cutting ourselves off from what feeds us and (c) exposing ourselves to what threatens us. In the face of certain dangers (climate change, nuclear accident, nano fuck-up), one can no longer wait for accidents to happen before we take corrective steps (*after the fact*), as has always been the case in human history: we find ourselves in front of “facts” that will have no *after*. At the same time, however, we all feel that the pace of certain self-revolution of filters is completely frantic, to the point of de-structuring the bare minimum of inertia that human identity (social, psychic) needs to maintain itself. As certain artistic developments in the second half of the twentieth century have shown, a constant revolution of sensibility tends to be anesthetizing.

Insofar as it presupposes the emergence of innovation (new scientific or artistic inventions, new toxicities), the self-revolution of filters nevertheless leads us to envision a *third model* on the horizon of an ontology of the filter: the *path-making* model (*le*

frayage, to clear). What comes to me and what goes through me pursues its way after me: while it goes through me, its course might be (more or less) altered, deflected, attenuated, deviated, accelerated, accentuated. The filter no longer functions here in terms of a *block* (to capture or eliminate), but rather as a shifter which *diverts the trajectory* of what it nevertheless lets pass. What comes from yesterday currently sculpts the shape of what will come tomorrow, because of the way in which I *inflect* the flux that passes through me.

I will illustrate this path-making phenomenon with two quotations. The first comes from a course by Gilles Deleuze, at a time when, in 1980, he was commenting on “*the tiny something*” new that *Anti-Oedipus*, written ten years earlier with Félix Guattari, had brought to the philosophical landscape. This novelty came from discarding approaches based on the notions of “person” or of “structure,” in order to make room for an approach focusing on “processes:” “*we spend our time being crossed by fluxes. And process is the course of a flux, it is the very simple image of a stream carving out its bed, [...] it is a movement of travel in which the course does not preexist: it opens its own path as it goes on.*”

Between the person’s “freedom” and the structure’s “need” – both illusory – there is the movement of the process that opens its own path. Neither the stream of water, nor the river bed are “free;” and yet *between* the path-maker and the path made, *something happens*, in the *active* way in which we *allow* what comes to us to *pass through us*. The other name of the filter is *path-making*: the orientation of the paths. Blocking, capturing, purifying: these terms only considered but a few arbitrarily isolated moments in a wider reality which consists of path-makings. The captured profits soon return into the circulation of investments, goods and services; the poisons removed by treatment plants are reprocessed, or redirected far from the factory itself (or buried somewhere, where they will swelter sometime in the next hundred years). The essence of the filter – which is itself the essence of our being – functions neither as a block nor as a capturing device, but as an *inflection of passages*. In other words: a *path-maker*.

My second citation is provided by the brief article that Diderot wrote for the *Encyclopédie* in order to define this notion (*FRAYAGE : TO CLEAR*): “*used about a road; He who takes the first steps opens the road; those who follow clear it. A cleared road or a road that has already been frequented, is the same thing. Clearing the road for vice is to remove scruples, & remove every difficulty. To clear a road for oneself, is, through personal effort, to reach a goal through means that are unknown to others, & that have been made one’s own & usual.*” This definition implies at least four things.

First, *to clear (frayer)* is officially defined as an “active verb:” the passerby acts upon a territory by clearing a passage. Behind the seemingly active verbal form, one nevertheless immediately recognizes a very particular idea about this action: the agency is to be located in “what is coming,” in the flux that passes *through* me, in the stream that carves out its bed by carrying me down its course. It is between the two poles of this oscillation that one must situate the particular agency of path-making. One can henceforth sketch a more realistic definition of what is a human “action:” a certain *inflection* of what is coming, so as to modify its course in the future. The challenge, as Gilles Deleuze formulated it, is to know how to “be worthy of what comes to us.”

Second implication to be drawn from Diderot’s definition: it is not only the first explorer (discoverer, inventor) who clears the way. “*He who takes the first steps opens*

the road; those who follow clear it.” Clearing, in this limited sense, is to follow a path that is *already* opened, it is to be humbly satisfied with *digging it further (eroding)* – without paying too much attention to the ambition of originality. What clears is *what comes after* (someone else who passes through there). The person who passes through second (or tenth or ten thousandth) can contribute to the erosion of the passage as much the person who opened it: his weight, his instruments (machete, chainsaw, Caterpillar) sometimes count for more than the order of passage.

The third suggestion, linked to the previous one: *clearing is the agency of the multitude*. Diderot speaks in the singular about “*he who takes the first steps*” and “*opens the road,*” but he uses the plural in “*those who follow*” and “*clear it.*” Clearing is a matter of frequency of passage: “clearing” or “frequentering,” “*is the same thing.*” The true clearing operator is neither weight nor instrument, but the *multiplicity* of those who pass, of those who “come after” the first “in-ventor” of this passage (*in-venire*).

Finally, the second half of Diderot’s article uses the active voice of clearing (clearing a road for someone) in a way that some languages officially distinguish as the “middle” voice (“To clear a road *for oneself*”): here we find the inventor again who “through personal effort” opens a way “unknown to others.” It is nevertheless first an action *on oneself and for oneself* (according to the grammatical definition of the middle voice) which is suggested by this original clearing; it does not so much involve “creating” as it does *appropriating* means which, ultimately, come from the outside.

Such is the common challenge of filtering and path-making: at the core of “what is coming,” one must appropriate for oneself the means of inflecting the passage of what passes through us, so as to make these new passages familiar to others. Instead of the vocabulary of *action* (political acts or artistic activism), an ontology of filtering and path-making invites us to use a vocabulary of *pushings*, of *drives*. Away from the (paralyzing) fantasy of the D-day of the Great Revolution or of the Masterpiece, we are invited to conceive of the world as something woven together by many drives varying in strength, varying in thrust, towards the left, right, top, bottom. The question is not so much *what is to be done?* as it is *towards where is it driving?*, *how does one deflect harmful drives?*, *how does one carve out promising channels?* – each at one’s own level, at one’s own scale, for a multitude of travels and travelers where every step counts.

Such a world hardly allows for heroism. Each of us is but a minute part of what is coming. We all are carried along by what passes through us. But we all contribute to orienting what will come tomorrow.