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Chapter 10 Trickster economy

We take it as unquestionable evidence that something like the economy not only exists, but is at the heart of the human condition. Instructed, directly or indirectly, by standard neoclassical economic theory as well as various versions of Marxism it is taken for granted that in any conceivable society one must be engaged in economic activities in order to make ends meet, especially to live well, but also simply to survive. Yet, this is by no means this case; the idea is one of the most obnoxious and destructive of the modern myths. No society or community on Earth had an economy, not to mention an ‘economic system’, up to about the 17th century; even the word did not exist in the sense in which we use it, being a modern invention. Far from helpful or natural for our life, it is the economy, in any and all its varieties, which lies at the bottom of our current entrapment. The economy is incompatible with decent human life; it is not sustainable or salvageable; it must disappear before it destroys everything that is valuable in our lives, possibly destroying the entire planet.

The full substantiation of this point certainly requires a monographic treatment. Here only the bare outlines of the argument can be offered, rhyming with the main objectives of this book. Hopefully the points can be made with sufficient clarity. The chapter will focus on a simple question: what does it mean to have something like an economy? And, by implication, why is it the case that the economy is necessarily a trickster economy?

‘Economic life’ and ‘political economy’: an etymological and semantic prelude

The word ‘economy’ is from Greek *oikonomia*, discussed by Aristotle, leading modern economists to fancy themselves to have Aristotle as the founding father of their discipline. Nothing can be further from the truth. What Aristotle discussed was not the ‘economy’, rather the household (*oikos*), and the rules that are necessary to keep in order to govern well a household. The household was a single, concrete, ‘private’ entity, different from the *polis*, which concerned the common matters of the entire community. *Oikos* and *polis* thus represented the two poles of classical Greek life; their combination in the manner of ‘political economy’ was inconceivable; such expression for Aristotelian thinking makes no sense, as if one would talk about a ‘private public’.

Furthermore, a central concern for any *oikos*, just as for the *polis*, was *autarchy*, or self-sufficiency. Any household, just as any city-state, could trade, and was engaged in some ‘commercial’ activities, but even the exchange of goods, and especially between city-states, was following the principles of gift-exchange rather than money-making, while the basic principle to follow for any entity was to be self-sufficient. One could not depend on others for its ‘good life’. Anything to be obtained through the exchange of goods had to be an extra which could be discontinued without any difficulty or costly sacrifice.

The radical difference between modern ‘economy’ and Greek *oikonomia* can be seen in the rarely noticed but fact that while the ‘economy’ stands for a field or area of social life, *oikonomia* implies a *normative discourse*. *Nomos* in Greek stands for ‘laws’ or ‘rules’; not the rules of the ‘economy’, but – to repeat – the rules of the household. Thus, if one wants to put it in this way, the discourse of economics existed before there was such a thing as the ‘economy’ – an evident absurdity; and in fact neither economics nor the economy existed in classical antiquity, just as nowhere else before modernity.

This can again be shown if we trace the conceptual history of the relevant terms further. The term ‘political economy’ and the discourse – again: nonsensical for Aristotle – emerged in France in the years just around 1600. This development has two aspects of extreme interest. To start with, the term was first used in Louis Turquet de Mayerne’s 1611 book *Aristo-democratic Monarchy* – a most interesting title, clearly inspired by Aristotle – which offered the first comprehensive manual of police regulation, a model for later absolutist police forces, while also containing for the first time the expression ‘political economy’, advancing Montchrétien’s 1615 work of the same title. This work was discussed by Foucault (1981), as central for modern biopolitics. However, in 1599, Turquet published *Traité des negoces et traffiques*, arguing that a new regulating agency is necessary, to be situated in between buyers and sellers, securing the proper, mutually acceptable flow of transactions. Turquet argued that a ‘bureau of merchants’ is necessary for the cities with fairs (*villes de Foire*), due to the large presence of foreigners in such cities (Desan 2002: 100-1). Thus, there seems to be a direct connection between regulating fairs, the rise of the police as a new state force, and the emergence of a new discipline, political economy; even Foucault’s project on police and reason of state can be re-launched through a new focus on fairs.

The second main point is that all four authors who first discussed the rules of the ‘economy’ were closely connected to the Huguenot cause. Apart from Turquet de Mayerne, this includes Olivier de Serres, Barthélemy de Laffemas and Antoine de Montchrétien. De Serres published in 1599 a book with the striking title of *Le théâtre d’Agriculture et mesnage des champs*. It was written at the request of the king, in order to help the finances of the state by promoting silk-production and was reedited 19 times in between 1600 and 1675. ‘Théâtre’ in the title referred to the intention of bringing together in an anthology the most remarkable technical procedures of the times, tying the book to the alchemic technology spectacles of Byzantium and Renaissance. De Laffemas was a personal servant of the king, and his book addressed, for the first time, contemporary ‘economic’ problems in a comprehensive manner. The book does not use the term ‘economic’ – the three central terms used to cover the meaning of ‘economy’ are *commerce*, *négoce*, and *trafic*; while the ‘police’, meaning the ensemble of structured rules, is considered as central for maintaining the consistency of civic life, threatened by abusive monetary and exchange processes. Finally, de Montchrétien’s 1615 book is considered virtually everywhere in the history of economic thought as inventing the term and offering the first analysis of the economy. The Huguenot ties of all these authors provide additional support for Weber’s thesis about the connection between Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism – or rather the ‘economic spirit’ – while also adding the important point concerning ‘outsiderness’ at the origins of such reflections.

The first use of the adjective ‘economic’, and in the particular sense of an ‘economic life’ (*vie économique*), is also French, even older, and – if possible – even more interesting, while reinforcing the ties between the economy and fairs. It was in the Prologue to *Gargantua* by Rabelais; in a middle, central and emphatic passage, which yet for us has become all but invisible. This expression was so singular that it is a *hapax* in Rabelais’s work (Bichon 1967: 107; Desan 1998: 105), meaning that it has this single occurrence there; and the expression ‘economic life’ would only gain its contemporary meaning in France in 1811 (Ibid.: 109). The invention of this term was one of Rabelais’s most important achievements.

The pioneering work exploring the meaning of this expression is a 1967 article by Jean Bichon, which took seriously for the first time Rabelais’ claim, previously considered only a piece of rhetoric, that the work would reveal a secret or occult doctrine (*doctrine absconce*) about high sacralities and horrific mysteries (Rabelais 1993: 37). It is the phrase right after this claim that mentions ‘economic life’, together with ‘religion’ and ‘political state’, as the areas about which the book contains such revelations. According to Bichon, the expression was an ‘illumination in thinking’ (*éclair de pensée*) (Ibid.: 117). In a follow-up article Bichon uses the

surprising silence his article encountered to render the argument more precise and better intelligible. He starts by reasserting the claim that such concern with the meaning of words is not trivial: standard works on the subject discuss the ‘economy’ of the 16th century as if the contemporary meaning of the word could be simply extrapolated into the past; something which is unacceptable and anachronistic. Thus, Thomas More’s *Utopia* was often considered as proposing a ‘statist’ economy; yet, the term ‘economy’ is not present in the work (Bichon 1970: 115). Second, Bichon makes the case for Rabelais even stronger: the word does not appear in a vacuum; rather, by comparing the changes made in the second edition of *Pantagruel* with some relevant arguments in *Gargantua* Bichon claims that in 1534 Rabelais’s mind was much preoccupied with the nature of the strange things that were happening in this newly emerging ‘economic life’ (Ibid.: 116). He connects changes in the meaning of both ‘political’ and ‘economic’ to Italy, referring in particular to the work of Castiglione, and claims that such meaning of ‘political’ as ‘civic’ even today survives in Italian (Ibid.). More specifically, he argues that the new meaning of ‘economic’ is to be searched around circulation, representing a radical departure from the thinking of Aristotle, as for Aristotle finance belonged to politics, in the old sense of the word, and not to economics (as *oikonomia*). Of the concluding theses of the article, two are particularly relevant: the first, which argues that the phrase ‘economic life’, even if cannot be considered as programmatic, still reflects a central preoccupation of the entire work; and the last, according to which Rabelais here is moving close to the modern idea that large circulation, understood as expressing generosity, constitute the foundation of social relations, thus pointing towards Smith’s ideas about sympathy in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Ibid.: 118).

Bichon’s arguments were only taken up in substance by a 1998 paper of Philippe Desan, later incorporated into his 2002 book on Renaissance economics, which added a number of central points. To start with, Desan emphasises that the processes which were reflected in the new term ‘economic life’ were not simply intellectually puzzling, but were considered, even by Rabelais, as outright absurd, deeply problematic and unsettling. Desan makes his point by focusing on two important episodes in Rabelais’s novels: the war in *Gargantua*, which breaks out exactly due to conflicts generated by the new logic of exchanges; and a discussion in Book Four between Panurge, the hero of the book and Dindenault, a sheep merchant from Taillebourg (Desan 1998: 107-8, 112-3). Rabelais was not judgmental about the behaviour of the merchants; the power of his comic take resided in the ‘ethical and economic instability’ that was produced as a result of their activity (Desan 1998: 108); an instability that captured the heart of the 16th century (Delumeau 1978). For Rabelais, as Bakhtin rightly emphasised, sociability as represented by the carnival and the ages-old human intermingling in the fairs was a central value; but he also perceived – and Bakhtin in Soviet Russia could not have become sensitive for this – that the new logic of monetary exchange, spun also on the fairs, especially by the charlatans, threatened this sociability. The war escalates out of a minor conflict between bakers and shepherds, where the bakers, in contrast to previous practice, refused to sell their goods directly to their old customers, as they were hoping to get more money on the fairs by selling them for *futures*. This idea, which is hardly intelligible even for us today, and which generated, escaping from its bottle, the deep crisis which have become our everyday ‘economic life’ since 2008, was completely unintelligible in the 1530s, rightly representing ‘horrific mysteries’ for Rabelais and his contemporaries.

These ‘horrific mysteries’, associated with the emergence of ‘economic life’, were already perceived in the first novel, even alluded to by its title. The name ‘Pantagruel’ is composed of two parts, *panta* meaning ‘all’ in Greek, while *gruel* to ‘alter’ in the Hagarene language (Rabelais 1994: 224). The name indicates that around the birth of Pantagruel some ‘horrific alteration’ happened in the world; cosmic events, that derailed the world order. Its first sign was the general drought, provoking an inextinguishable thirst, due to some cosmic

warming up (*réchauffement cosmique*) (Menini 2009: 79-80). Similarly horrific mysteries were also evoked by the rhetoricians, helping to promote warmongering. In one of the most hilarious, yet deeply serious, even preoccupying chapters of *Gargantua* (Chapter 33) Rabelais connects the spirit of conquest to meaningless geographical knowledge, promoted by philologists, where the mere listing of place-names serves to generate a spirit of conquest (Rabelais 1993: 153-7).

Due to this liminal chasm which suddenly opened up in time and place, between past, present and future, between producers and buyers, through the activity of 'Italian' merchants (Desan 1998: 111), it was widely perceived that some ethical or moral rules were necessary to limit the escalating activity of merchants. This was searched in two directions: one concerned a normative ethics that could regulate, from inside, the conduct of merchants; while the second in some kind of overall regulation of the 'economic' activities of the fairs.

The second leads to the work of Turquet, already discussed. Concerning the first, Desan mentions a book by Benedetto Cotrugli, devoted to the ideal merchant, translated from Italian in 1582. The book argues that a merchant in its ethical principles must be more and not less severe than others, given that in order to do his business well he needs to evoke faith and trust in his personality (Desan 1998: 110). Thus, he must be an ideal nobleman and head of household – for which the Italian original uses the word *uomo economo*, thus the term 'economic' in its old, Aristotelian meaning (Cotrugli 1573: 87); while keeping away from games of hazard, excessive drinking and eating, legal processes, the company of 'bad people', and especially being engaged in alchemy (Desan 1998: 110); or exactly the kind of conduct charlatans were charged to be engaged upon. In particular, the new activity of merchants was threatening to transform commerce into a game, which was forbidden and generated a huge confusion, resulting in the extremely negative view that was formulated at the end of the Renaissance about merchants (Ibid.: 111-4). In this context it is important to note that this book, published first in Venice in 1573, was originally written in 1458 (Rigobon 1892: 9), thus exactly in the context of the first appearance of charlatans in Italy, just five years after the sack of Constantinople. It was also probably an ineffective, even hopeless undertaking, as the logic of the 'fairground economy' evidently can't be handled through traditional morality.

Still, could one object, does it matter whether a word for economics or the economy existed or not? Well actually, words *do* matter, are part of our reality, render possible understanding and the sharing of ideas; and matter particularly in this context, as how it is possible to argue that for all times and places the central aspect of human life was economic activities if such a word, combining and integrating the production, circulation and consumption of all 'goods' within a particular society and territory did not even exist? Heredity, to be sure was transmitted by genes even when human had no clue about the principles of genetics, but this kind of argument cannot be applied to the economy. Hunter-gatherer tribes of all times and places hunt and collect their food, peasant always and everywhere till their own land, but where was 'the economy' of which these activities were parts and parcels? The answer is simple: nowhere.

This argument was already formulated, almost verbatim, though without full drawing the consequences, in his classic work by Fernand Braudel, the most important and influential economic historian of the 20th century.

While Braudel started, following a suggestion by Lucien Febvre, by summarising the findings of economic historians, he increasingly noticed that the storyline based on classical economics about the 'natural' and gradual evolution of the modern economy was untenable. His key discovery, influencing the very structure of his 3-volume magnum opus, was that the preindustrial world contained three distinct economic spheres: material subsistence, local markets, and long-distance trade. The rise of capitalism, or the exclusive search for monetary gain, is rooted in long-distance trade conducted by merchants. Braudel's idea radically subverts

the ruling doctrines in economic history and economics. However, Braudel did not go far enough in drawing the consequences of his own discovery. While he recognised the centrality of fairs for the emergence of the modern economy, and their connections with the rise of the stock-market, he lacked the conceptual instruments for studying the *permanentisation of the temporary* as a phenomenon, and its potential significance.

Braudel's insights concerning late-Renaissance fairs focus around the paradoxes of such fairs. While fairs most evidently bring a certain prosperity, this is a rather mixed blessing, as many towns with prosperous fairs had to learn. The most spectacular case is Medina del Campo, famous for its fairs in the 15-16th centuries, but almost vanishing after the loss of their importance. Another instructive case, and a good indication that people on the spot realised the dangers of fairs and commercialisation, is Nuremberg, which in the 1420s got the right to hold a fair, but failed to live with it – and, as a result, preserved its identity (Braudel 1982: 85). The fight against the limitless growth of fairs and markets accompanied the development of European cities for some time, a particularly instructive case being Paris, where both the *Parlement* and later police officers 'tried desperately to keep the markets within reasonable bounds', but 'in vain' (1982: 31). The long-term consequences of limitless growth are our situation where 'All society's dearest symbols, or nearly all [...] have been emptied of meaning', and 'All intellectual concepts are distorted or destroyed' (Braudel 1980: 7).

The dynamism of capitalism, for Braudel, is rooted in features of the 'space' of exchange, features accentuated in fairs, and due to the inherently liminal characteristics of exchange. The space of exchange – easily a 'non-place' (Augé 1995) – has three main characteristics, each recalling liminality, in particular its crucial feature, the void, much discussed by scholars around *International Political Anthropology* (Horvath 2013, 2021, Thomassen 2014). This is because economic life involves the crossing of a boundary, directly recalling the vocabulary of liminality and rites of passage: 'Only if he crosses the frontier into the elementary market is the individual, or "agent", included in the exchange, in what I have called economic life' (Braudel 1977: 17-19). Furthermore, Braudel argues that the realm of economic exchange or circulation takes place in a specific, 'restricted and sensitive' area, a thin layer 'in between' buyers and sellers (1977: 41-3). Evidently, not just exchange, but all human interaction takes place in-between individuals, or in a potentially empty space. But the in-between, when it is properly navigated and disciplined or cared for, is the realm of dynamism, relations between individuals allowing for the formation and transformation of character – thus the in-between is a highly creative realm. The central issue is that in most human interaction, like dialogue, the potentially threatening space of the void is subordinated to the concrete substance of humans, who participate in the interaction with their whole beings – tones, gestures, or facial expressions. Everything is done in order not to lose the concrete and personal aspect during this entry into the potentially empty space. The act of 'exchange' or 'barter', in contrast to this, involves, in a quite unique manner, the opposite feature: an 'alienation' from a certain object – usually, because it was 'superfluous' – and the use of this object as a means to structure the empty space between individuals (or strangers). In fact, this peculiarity or specificity of the act of exchange is recognised at the heart of Roman property law: in order to exchange an object one had to place the object into empty space, away from oneself, and so the object first had to become alienable, through an act of separation; the object had to be prepared, in a quasi-sacred way, to be renounced (see Fustel de Coulanges ZZZ; Verdery ZZZ). Therefore, in the act of exchange the void between persons is "structured" by means of an alienated or sacrificial object, rather than being navigated by acting individuals responsible for their personal conduct. The reliance on the technological means of sacrificial objects in human relations involves the suspension of action and opens the door to imitative behaviour that is emptied of meaning (see Weber, especially the early sections of *Economy and Society* on action). The 'dynamism' or limitlessness of capitalism is connected to the lack of

individual (distinctive, limited) action at the heart of economic exchange. Finally, this void at the heart of economic relations is further underscored by Braudel's recognition of the fact that long-distance trade, the source of capitalism, is located beyond or outside societal boundaries, thus heightening the liminality of economic exchange. For Braudel, long-distance trade is not simply situated 'in between' various areas of human existence, but also above them, in 'the very summit of society', conducted as it is on behalf people of the highest social standing, especially emperors and kings (Ibid.: 48-9, 63-6; an idea formulated in contrast to Max Weber, Lenin and Gerschenkron); however, the actual agents of long-distance trade are people of low social standing, especially foreigners, who are beneath the rest of society. Thus, the activity of economic exchange in long-distance trade is determined by societal outsiders.

Braudel also recognised the links between fairs and the stock-exchange, singling them out in two crucial summary passages (Ibid.: 34; 1982: 81) as the heart of the dynamism of modern European capitalism. While his focus here is on the technical aspects of the exchange process, the component that for Max Weber cannot explain the rise of capitalism, and which is close to the technological explanation that Braudel discarded earlier, this is mitigated with a repeated emphasis on the role played by fairs, up to the 18th century. Braudel accepts Raymond de Roover's claim that the 16th century was the age of the fairs (1982: 135). Here a central role is played by the socio-psychological aspects of the fairs, which were not merely areas for the exchange of goods and the activities of merchants, but were rather also places for popular entertainment and feasting, thus adding the carnival psychology of Bakhtin to the Smith-inspired psychology of bettering conditions in Braudel's analysis. Thus, Braudel's approach can be complemented by Bakhtin's.

However, the picture first must be rounded up by a major discovery, where Braudel acknowledges a major shift with respect of his earlier work: the recognition of the much-ignored significance of Genoa in the crucial transition between the 16th and 17th centuries (Braudel 1984: 158-73). This re-valorises the port-fair connection, also emphasised - though not conclusively - by Polanyi (1944: 60), as Genoa was a port, but its rise to temporary dominance was sealed through its connections with the Besançon and Piacenza fairs (Marsilio 2015). These fairs had a unique feature: they were not a place for the exchange of goods, rather they were meeting-places for merchants to settle their affairs; thus, its social aspect was quite limited. Therefore, just as the late Renaissance fairs became quasi permanent in Lyon and Antwerp, giving rise to the stock-market in the 1530s, as a way to deal with business between fairs, the Genoa-Besançon-Piacenza network moved a step further, altogether by-passing popular participation. This adds significance to the fact that merchant power in Genoa was extremely concentrated: Genoa acted as an 'incubator' for the spirit of capitalism, comparable to the role of Ferrara in the emergence of modern theatricality (Szokolczai 2013).

Thus, as we have seen, in contrast to the perspective of the classics of political economy and taken over into the positive unconscious of modern economics, the modern economy did not grow out of markets, but out of fairs. Far from being a matter of terminological difference, or an irrelevant historical matter of no consequence for the present, the difference is absolutely fundamental. It is by no means accidental that the fairy-tale story about markets getting bigger all the time, gradually, ignoring completely both fairs and the rise of the stock-market, in spite of being absolutely false, have become an unquestioned dogma, because if one takes seriously the radical difference between markets and fairs, the untenability of the modern economy becomes plain evidence. A market, any market anywhere is clearly a liminal place in which various people, as buyers and sellers, encounter each other, but which does not dislocate people from their surroundings, and does not change identities. Whoever goes to a market returns to his home and continues to live as before.

A fair is different. It is a rare event, normally taking place once in a year. It is much more than an occasion for buying and selling; it is a major feast, both social and religious, in which people are out to have a good time, religious feasting being combined with eating and drinking, and of course a major occasion for finding partners, whether for an occasion or for a lifetime.

The best way to conceive of the modern economy, which is also faithful to the historical track of its emergence, is as a permanent fair(ground). Even on a surface look, the idea fits perfectly the most basic features of the modern economy, as at one level it sounds too good to be true, in another it is frighteningly absurd. It is too good to be true, as it is the dream of every child, and not only, to have a feast that lasts forever, without work, without study, without any serious preoccupation, just having fun all the time. This, however, is also impossible, and patently absurd, as anybody could realise, so let's forget about it – except that the modern economy purports to perform *exactly this*. No need to trouble, worry, concern, think, just leave everything to the economy, and it will deliver it to you, directly, at your doorstep – though with the minuscule proviso that *you* also must deliver yourself to the economy, give up yourself, your freedom, anything you concretely possess, and at *that* price you'll be able to satisfy all your dreams, can have anything what you want, can be anything you want to be, *except* what you concretely already have and *except* what you are at the heart of your being, as you cannot keep any part of you outside the fairground logic, which implies the complete substitutability of everything and everybody. All your dreams can be satisfied, but only if your dreams are the same as the dreams of everybody else; if you fully and without any mental reservation join the infinite circle of complete substitutability, or if you become member of the ship of fools.

Formulated in these terms, having brought out its essence in this manner, the meaning of the modern economy as a permanent fairground can be immediately translated into a series of important expressions already amply used in this book. First, and in full conformity to Goethe's hints, as discussed by Binswanger (1994), the modern economy offers everyone a Faustian pact with the devil. You can have anything, you can *be* anything, but only at the 'negligible' price of giving up your soul – destroying what is indestructible inside you, what only *you* can destroy. And anybody who did so and became a successful businessman, entrepreneur, technologist, politician, entertainer and so on will shout at you that you must do the same, you cannot keep yourself outside: in order to confirm their belief in their own choice, which at the bottom of their heart they know was mistaken, they absolutely must convince anybody who has not yet done so that they must follow suit. And they will also try to set up the institutional framework, a long-term effort actually culminating in the current lockdown, that nobody has the option to keep oneself apart.

This leads to the second, closely connected terminology; the paradoxical fact of a trickster society, produced by a trickster economy (but, as we'll see in more detail, any economy, *the* economy itself, is a trickster economy). The trickster is the eternal outsider, not belonging anywhere, not participating, not being part of any community, having no solidity, no feet in concreteness. What 'the economy' requires is to do exactly as the trickster did, a long time ago; but not simply to follow the track of the solitary outsider, but to follow the track what *everybody* is doing now, in the interest of everybody. This circle is the great trick; arguably the greatest trickster trick – so far – or all world history. The functioning of the economy requires the paradoxical obligation on the part of everybody to become a trickster, to perform the leap into the void, to leave behind everything that is stable and concrete, and thus to join the paradoxical 'community' of the homeless, wondering, circulating spirits. And such leap is outright a moral obligation, in the interest of the economy, of everybody else, of the 'other' – to *become* another other.

The economy, apart from following a trickster logic, and leading to the constitution of a trickster society, is also identical to a sacrificial logic, as joining it means an act of sacrifice

– an act of self-sacrifice, at least in the sense of sacrificing everything what one was holding so far as sacred, and as concrete, one's own. It also implies a risk, the risk of not succeeding, but a risk that must be taken, as not playing the risky game, supposedly, implies to lose at the start – to be left out of the game, to become an outsider – though the paradoxical outsider to a paradoxical society of tricksters; in the terminology of Camus, to become a rebel to the world in revolt.

Finally, just as the 'ointment' of a normal society are gifts, gratuitous and generous offerings that render possible benevolence, enabling the smooth working of social relations, the 'lubricant' of the economy, or of a trickster society is infinite substitutability: the idea that nothing is final, nothing is forever, no object, no relationship, no friend, but everything must be continuously reconfirmed, depending on the principle of instant – but therefore always fleeting and never final – success, so that whatever we currently have must be thrown away at the first occasion when the chance appears to have something better. This is *the* principle of the operation of the economy, and whoever fails to understand this does not understand anything, is hopelessly old-fashioned, backward, a loser.

The dynamic movement characteristic of the economy and the related trickster society is therefore a peculiar combination of the straight line and the circle – just as it can be observed in Cubist paintings, even dominating Picasso's subsequent work. One can say that *any* movement, or any shape, is a combination of straight and circular lines, but this is not the case, as it can be clearly shown through Tim Ingold's work about lines. Any movement indeed follows some kind of line, but this is neither geometrically linear, nor circular. If one has a large garden and is working there frequently, planting flowers, pruning trees, cutting the grass, then eventually some paths will be trod in the garden that form a concrete way that is neither straight nor circular. This is the way all roads were formed in the past, in the sense of a 'beaten path'. In contrast, roads made through modern planning are indeed either straight or circular, or a combination, recalling Picasso's designs.

The economy certainly follows an absolutely straight – and absurd – linearity, and an absolutely round – and similarly absurd – circularity. The former concerns economic growth, which must always go forward, assuring the progress of the economy, supposedly animated by technological growth, but in fact both only follow the alchemic principle of taking everything always more apart, so that the increasingly meaningless fragments could be put together again in artificial and thus increasingly pliant, substitutable entities. This is captured, on the other side, by the circle: the circle of general equilibrium theory, where we should recall that in biology such an 'equilibrium' equals death; circling at any constant price level, as the theory cannot account for history; just an infinite, meaningless circulation of particles, recalling Brownian motion. Instead of leading to a bright future, economic theory is a shortcut to sudden death.

Fairground hooks

A major difference between a market and a fair is the use of 'hooks', in order to capture clients. Such hooks include various forms of advertising, like pamphlets, sheets, mimes, mountebanks, of which the archetypal source is the fairground barker. In a local market this is not necessary, not even possible, as people know each other, and the use of such tricks would immediately make people suspect that somebody tries to sell unreliable merchandise. A fair, however, is an encounter between strangers, so the use of such tricks becomes possible, even necessary. The more frequent fairs are, eventually becoming permanent, the more the use of such tricks become regular and taken for granted, resulting in the institutionalisation of the media. The *pudenda origo* of the media is therefore not the intellectual exchange of idea, nor the political deliberation of policies, but fairground advertisement. The mediatisation of politics and

intellectual life, starting from preference of journals over articles, as we'll see/saw in some detail, is not 'progress' in any sense – democratisation, openness, whatever – rather is the direct consequence of a progressive fairgroundisation of human and social life.

The economy as a permanent fair: general equilibrium, entrepreneurs, media and interests

As the previous considerations make it evident, the modern economy is nothing but a gigantic trick, through which our world is transformed into a trickster land, where we all are forced to become tricksters and play trickster games (even formalised in 'game theory', which starts from the 'prisoner's dilemma, thus making it evident how the current lockdown situation is conceived by our rulers as a model for how trickster logic can become all-pervasive). Every single aspect of the modern economy can be inserted into and made sense through this perspective. Within the limits of this chapter only a single set of related elements will be pursued, based on the guiding idea that the modern economy is a permanent fair, thus a mode of permanent liminality, or where a temporary in-betweenness became lasting forever.

Let's start with indeed the single most basic idea of modern neoclassical economics, the claim that there is such thing as a general equilibrium, or that purely left on their own, by the adjustment process of innumerable acts of buying and selling 'the economy' will reach an equilibrium, without any external intervention and regulation, which supposedly is identical with a state of bliss for everyone – a kind of paradise of earth: the free market as a quasi-religious, Hayekian myth, the flip side of the myth of democracy as a secular Gnostic religion (Gomez Dávila).

But what does this really mean? What are the real bases, and significance, of such a general equilibrium?

Here, and still at the level of most basic ideas, we immediately bump into the biggest trick of neoclassical economic theory: the prohibitive and prohibiting claim that it does not matter that the assumptions of the theory are unrealistic, in so far as they work – and they evidently *do* work: 'it's the economy, stupid!'. To begin with, and stating the obvious, this is a typical fairground illusionist trick, an affront on understanding and truth: look at my hands, I don't do anything that is not plain and evident – as, to be sure, everything has already been arranged in advance and at the background. Most certainly, there are some real bases of the economy that assure its workings, in so far as and to the extent of which it works. What are these, even though economists refuse to acknowledge them?

Obviously, the idea of such a general equilibrium assumes that the life of everyone in a taken for granted manner is oriented towards 'markets'. From a historical-sociological and anthropological perspective this is most obviously not the case, as for most people in any community markets intervene only in a minuscule manner in the conduct of everyday life. So the *real* basis of a general equilibrium is that one must orient *all* of one's life towards the actions and reactions of 'markets'. This is by no means trivial, as it amounts to a genuine and wholesale revaluation of values. Simple local markets do not have the power to force such a change; only fairs can do so, in particular a fair that has become permanent.

But what does such a permanent fair means for the life of everyone in a community? It first of all implies a new and overwhelming centre, as a kind of nuclear attractor. The centre of people's life, before modernity, was the family; and then the broader surrounding community, the tribe, village, or town. Each of these implied fundamental, unshakeable concreteness and certainties, that were not up for sale or for substitution. The permanent fair assumed by general equilibrium theory implies that the fairground becomes the new centre for the life of everyone;

that one behaves in his entire life as the rules and exigencies of this fairground require: sells and buys everything, including his own time and efforts.

Here we need to incorporate the ideas of Max Weber and the spirit of capitalism, already evoked above. For Weber, the central idea of Protestantism, first with Luther and then even more with Calvin, was the religion cannot be limited to attending Sunday mass and similar occasional events and activities, but must penetrate the whole of one's life; every single moment of every single activity, as part of its radical salvationism (the term 'salvationism' is taken from Horvath 2021). The permanent fairground implies something very similar, in a secular setting, and Weber even helps to explain the mode of transmission: with Calvinism, the focus became one's state of being an elect (through Predestination or the 'grace of god', so even grace as charisma has its place there); and eventually the economy, or business success, came to be taken as proof of such an elect state. This was probably rendered possible by the disappearance, in Protestantism, of pilgrimage and the feasts of saints, and such 'spiritual vacuum' was filled by the economy. The 'real' basis of a general equilibrium is therefore the emergence of such a new centre of life: the permanent fairground, or the economy.

This, however, though absolutely crucial, is still only a first step. The next step concerns the exact manner in which the new 'sun' actually enters the everyday life of every human being. In economic theory this is usually done by ideas like the division of labour, personal interests and preferences, or the opportunity cost. We now need to investigate what these mean and what are their real bases.

The starting point is the 'division of labour'. For us, being indoctrinated by economic theory since generations – and, just as bad, by Durkheimian sociology and the 'social division of labour' – the idea seems self-evident, but it is by no means so. Sharing of efforts and cooperation is certainly an old concern, but the division of labour as understood in modern economics is something completely different. It implies a certain infinite process, both in terms of the act of dividing – an infinite fragmentation into ever smaller tasks and units; and in terms time – anticipating even more extensive divisions in the future, as the engine of unlimited economic growth. The problem is that it threatens the integrity of any entity, whether human or social, living or non-organic, the guiding idea being that further fragmentation in the future can always bring more 'efficient' results. The entire process is clearly alchemic in inspiration, following the twin alchemic operations of analysis and synthesis, which through Kantian philosophy became insinuated into the guiding principles of thinking. The operation also incorporates the characteristics of the zero, as such irrational (*alogos*, in the classical Greek sense) mode of operating – meaning: what ignores and destroys harmonious proportionality and measure, *ratio* or *logos*, keeping in mind the integrity of entities – can only be performed with the help of the (non-)number zero.

The situation, however, is even worse as the economy, together with infinite divisibility, also relies upon the twin principle of infinite substitutability. The entities are not only increasingly divided, whether land, building, communities, human occupations and identities, but are also substituted with each other, and with increasing, maddening velocity, or 'velociferity' (Goethe). Every single 'thing' in any human life that is of any value is concrete, given, and irreplaceable. Yet, the economy operates on the basis of the principle that the value of anything is defined by whatever it takes to substitute it. While at first limited to objects – and even there the idea is mistaken, except for technological products – it is now extended as the principle of human and social relationships, potentially without any limit, with the exchange and trade of living organs serving as relevant example – though already being surpassed by the wonders of genetic engineering, as again the financial, technological and political interests behind the current lockdown demonstrate.

The argument can be illustrated through the idea of ‘opportunity cost’, considered as the single most important idea of Austrian economics (source of contemporary neo-liberalism, courtesy of von Hayek, von Mises, Schumpeter, and their various Chicago and other comrades), also identified as particularly pernicious by Alfred Gell. The idea, as all the basic ideas of neoclassical economics, is exceedingly simple, seems even self-evident, but only if one is inside the logic of economics – as outside its scope the trickiness, even idiocy of the argument becomes evident. It is that the cost of anything we buy or do is not limited to the money we pay for it, but the money we could have gained by doing something else – and which in this way was ‘sacrificed’. The term ‘sacrifice’ is revealing, if rarely used verbatim – though always implied – as it reveals in itself the sacrificial character of the modern economy. The problem, however, is wider, as it brings up, in principle, again behind any act of purchase, or even any activity whatsoever, a process of infinite options or possibilities, and infinite substitutability, where every action is taken out of its concrete context, the natural dynamics of everyday life being broken, and in a distinctly Kantian manner everyone is induced to start, basically at every moment of life, an infinite process of conscious reflection concerning what one is doing, how to improve it, and ultimately concerning how it would be possible to make more money out of it – pretended as the ultimate aim of human life.

This leads to the next key term, interest. In this economic (trickster) logic, the infinite process of reflection and procrastination is only stopped when taken to its moving force and also ultimate point, which is one’s own interests. Such interest, presumably, are the most ‘objective’ thing in the world, guiding everybody’s action, whether one acknowledges it or not. If somebody is performing an ‘altruistic act’ (itself a major misnomer, as decent human beings are neither egoistic, nor altruistic – these are schismogenic opposites inside existential corruptness), it is presumed to have been done in bad faith, or alternatively redefined as the ‘real’ interest of that person. However, the word ‘interest’, revealingly, etymologically means ‘being in between’ (*inter esse*), and thus simply cannot be the ultimate reference point of human action. In fact, in a non-economic sense interest simply means a kind of attractiveness ‘something’ has for ‘someone’ – which assumes solidity and not void-like in-between on both parts: an object or a scenery which has inherent qualities that make it attractive, and a human being who has a certain character and taste who finds that thing attractive. The interest in this sense indeed develops in the ‘in-between’, just as Platonic-Voegelinian *metaxy*, but ‘it’ has no objectivity; and the moment an ‘object’ of interest reveals itself as substitutable, or as guided by the logic of substitutability, it loses its interesting character. No matter where we look in economic theory, and its underlying mentality, the evident certainties turn out to be chimeras.

Due to lack of space, I’ll bring up two more examples, both literally about the in-between – not surprisingly so central for the economy, as its real basis is a certain type of permanent liminality, or permanent in-betweenness. One concerns the main actors of this economy, the entrepreneurs, where the meaning is “to catch hold of, seize”, again in the middle. Not surprisingly, originally the term had nothing to do with the – anyway not yet existent – economy, rather had clear military and attacking connotations, standing for “adventurous disposition, readiness to undertake challenges”, recalling the activities of pirates or Renaissance *condottieri*. The second refers to one of the most important, yet completely ignored as unacknowledgeable actors of the economy, the media. The importance of the media for the modern economy, just as for politics and society, is evident, ranging from commercials to the very modalities of doing business. Yet, strikingly, economic theory simply ignores the media, even refuses to acknowledge that the media play any role inside the economy. Such fairground illusionist trick is handled through its ‘assumptions’, like full rationality and perfect information, which implies that consumers, being rational, cannot be influenced, and possessing full information do not need further sources of information. Of course, this is an

ideological lie, but the reason is not to be searched alongside some Freudo-Marxist theories of exploitation, oppression and repression, rather it is part of the more basic effort to hide away the specific rather than universalistic nature of the economy. *The* economy can only work if its very existence in its specific essence is not questioned; if it is taken as natural and self-evident. The role of the medias, back to their archetypal source, the fairground barker, is to invite people to relax, give up their attention and care, and devote themselves fully to fairground entertainments, and the related acts of buying and selling, no matter what it takes, and without giving any consideration to the future. Economic theory cannot admit such a role, and it is written from inside the economy; as it assumes that everybody by definition or by nature is already part of the economy, cannot even conceive of any other life goal than making more and more money. It *has* to ignore the medias. The astonishing thing is that it got away with it – as it got away with everything else, and repeatedly.

Modernity is truly an absurd madhouse.

Concluding comments. Back to salvationism and the fairground, twin engendering principles of the modern economy

The modern economy, just as modern alchemic technology and the modern mediated public arena grew out of the fairground. The fair is simply the ground of modernity.

Late Renaissance fairs played an incredibly corrosive but also attractive role, after the collapse of the Byzantium. They became ever longer and more frequent; by the 1530s the biggest European fairs took place four times yearly, lasting 4-6 weeks each, so covering almost half a year. Then, first in Antwerp and Lyon, they gave place to the stock-market.

They were corrosive, as such frequent fairs, with their new type of merchants, alchemist charlatans and mime entertainments undermined all principles of social orderliness, among others provoking an unprecedented migration into the cities. All around Europe, but especially in Germany, France and Northern Italy various ‘police’ regulations were drawn up, where the word was directly from Aristotle, a translation of *politeia*, or the constitution of a well-ordered city. At the same time such fairs also undermined religiosity, among others through indulgences sold in endless copies in the fairs, courtesy of the invention of printing. Luther’s attack on the use of indulgences by the Catholic Church, central for his 95 theses of 1517, would not have taken place without the mass selling of such indulgences in fairs. It is similarly of great importance that Calvin’s city, Geneva, was *the* main fair in the South-Western part of Europe until the rise of the Lyon fairs, set up by the French kings explicitly to undermine the Geneva fairs, and so Calvin’s attack on the radical corruptness of mankind was no doubt modelled on his own city, due to the double effect of the corroding fairs, first, and then the similarly corroding effects of their collapse – just as since then the destructions provoked by economic crises are only surpassed by the destructions generated by excessive economic booms. The Puritans were pure, first of all and originally, in the sense of being presumably exempt from the corroding effects of fairground entertainment. It is due to the radically corrosive character of fairs that the similarly radical Calvinist salvationism developed as schismogenic counterpart to fairground entertainment. Puritanism is no escape from the fairground, just as vice versa: they assume each other, and together destroy any meaning in our world.

This is because for the same reasons fairs were also extremely attractive. They catered for all kinds of popular entertainment, offering for a short while pure fun, the time of their lives for everyone involved, thus were impossible to eradicate, just as the circus and gladiator games were in Roman (and also Byzantine) times, and just as football games or rock concerts became in our own times. The impulse to restraint these forms of popular entertainments was also mitigated by the fact that fairs, with all their entertainment, soon turned out to be extremely profitable for the authorities as well. Thus, as time passed, the urge to set up police regulations

became combined with the setting up of increasingly modernised systems of taxation, where the basis of taxation was no longer personal status and property, but 'income' – or whatever 'entered' a 'business' – a development also further spun by the French Revolution. The fairground economy and the police-taxation state also developed together, as twin secular versions of Calvinist salvationism.

Eventually fairs became permanent, in one form became markets as the stock-market, and in another, more extensive version became what we now call as the economy.