

Dupuy, Jean-Pierre. 2012. *L'avenir de l'économie*. Paris: Flammarion. ISBN: 978-2-0812-5345-2. Paperback: 21 Euros. Pages: 292.

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Liberal capitalisms have always separated the economy from politics, narrowing political life to formal electoral politics dominated by the capitalist class. This dashed early socialist hopes that the working class vote would accomplish transformative, even revolutionary change through parliamentary processes. In the current historical moment of capitalism, this restrained, inadequate vision of politics has become even narrower: national and international technocrats, like the “troika” of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission and the European Central Bank in Greece and Portugal, decide human fates in the name of an economic expertise that is said to be merely technical, not political. Of course, to much of the world's population this is not new, with oppressed classes in the developing world collapsing under the supposedly expert advice and interventions of the IMF and the World Bank, nevermind non-governmental organizations and Foundations offering “neutral” aid. But this technocratic, economic approach to managing social life is arguably now increasingly globally dominant.

As Jean-Pierre Dupuy explains, his book is born out of shame at this development, particularly the spectacle of political men (sic) abdicating political will to what he calls the fantasy of the “markets” (p.9). And as Dupuy observes, calling markets a “fantasy” is not to say they are without real, devastating effects both human and ecological. At the same time, the book brings together Dupuy's successive intellectual infatuations, combining his own particular take on the works of thinkers as varied (if as white, male and usually European) as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Rawls, Ivan Illich, Günther Anders, René Girard and more, into a new configuration that is more than the sum of the parts. The result is a strikingly original argument against the ravages of contemporary economic technocracy and for a new civilization that he describes as a “post-economic modernity” (p.200). Even more than that, it is a wide-open existential call to arms against the economic fatalisms that reduce the human horizon to the limited possibilities of social life here and now.

As he describes it himself, Dupuy's "conceptual pamphlet"¹ (p.15) is an argument against the "incredible reduction that economic thought operates in the ways that it deals with human affairs" (p.15). In vivid, sometimes withering prose, he calls for nothing less than a revolution against the "economystification" of human life on earth. However, this is not a Marxist revolution based in actually-existing class struggles. Rather, in an idealistic twist that many historical materialists are unlikely to appreciate, to their loss, his revolution is based in metaphysics.

Ultimately, following earlier work, Dupuy calls for an "enlightened catastrophism" (see also Dupuy 2002). By this, Dupuy means a dramatized but rational prophesy of doom to be held up against the "obscene optimism" (p.157) of mainstream economists with their promises of future growth, in a context where growth is sacralized as the central aim of social life. Through such realistic apocalyptic prophesies, humanity will be galvanized to un-do the inevitable, tragic future that awaits them. Dupuy maintains this is only an apparent paradox, because dramatic pronouncements of doom collapse the gap between knowing and believing. Without such dramatization "we don't believe what we know" (p.289). For instance, we "know" about global warming but fail to truly "believe" it is happening and so fail to make the necessary changes in our individual and collective behaviours. By collapsing the gap between knowing and believing through dramatic narratives, Dupuy argues, a new metaphysical time is created between the present and the coming catastrophe (p.264). This is a profoundly political moment when human beings take their fates fully into their own hands, no longer combatting the phantom of the "market" – which is nothing more than humanity's "own violence, reified, externalized" (p.289) – but instead directly combatting human violence itself.

In making this argument, Dupuy tackles a range of contemporary social actors. In ways that sometimes recall Marx's own reservations about the organized working class, for instance, Dupuy is disdainful of the ecologically-unsustainable productivism of some unions. Recalling a French union that violently demanded the continuation of the Concorde programme, he asks "Should one think that (the union) was thus seeking to hasten the emergence of a society without classes, in which all the ex-proletariats would fly supersonically?" (p.136). His answer is, "Of course not" -- the union was only seeking work for its members in an industrial, capitalist context in which work has, however, become a kind of torture for many, perhaps most people (p.136). The failure of unions to move beyond this model is an imaginative failure to grasp that the issue is not work, but the need for "a new civilization" (p.136), one in which torturous work will no longer be "necessary" for economic growth and, so it is implied, human wellbeing.

Some might argue that Dupuy's solution to what he describes as the "gordian knot" of an industrial capitalist world in which the finality is work, whilst economic rationality makes this work tortuous, is demagogic. He does not call for popular revolt by

¹All translations from the French text are mine.

the working class-for-itself or similar revolutionary mass actors. Instead, he demands that “prophets” replace “experts” (p.118), where the prophet is more modest than the expert, since s/he knows that there is “there is no truth independent from how it's transmitted” (p.118). In other words, the performance of truth is part of the truth. This is an argument we are more used to hearing from Black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins (2009), who reminds us that we believe Aretha Franklin's call for “R-E-S-P-E-C-T” *because* and not despite the way she sings it (p.127), than from mathematically trained European philosophers like Dupuy. Rationality is here deemed inadequate as the measure of truth and as the stimulus for transformative social change; there is a necessarily dramaturgical, emotional element to both.

Dupuy's privileged role for the prophet may be dangerous in its apparent dismissal of ordinary people, especially the oppressed. But I think Dupuy is right to insist on the dangers of the cold-blooded “rationality” of mainstream economics, with its “trivial”, “obscure and futile” (p.157) mathematical models and its unimaginative self-satisfaction, both with the world-as-it-is and with the state of the economics discipline itself. Dupuy calls for prophetic politicians, but arguably what he is really seeking are revolutionary artists of all kinds, both popular and elite, who make immediate –not only rationally but emotionally – the real threats to human wellbeing and even human survival within an ecocidal capitalist system. If Dupuy “overlooks” such potential contributions from among oppressed peoples, there is nothing in his argument that is incompatible with it. Indeed, Marx' own impassioned, hence unforgettable writing about “spectres haunting Europe” arguably comforts Dupuy's argument that the urgency provided by drama (in this case dramatic prose) does matter to inspiring human beings to extraordinary action. This dramatic, emotional urgency does not undercut rationality, rather it is wedded to it, closing the gap between cognitive recognition of the need for radical action and actual engagement in necessary movements for social change.

Throughout the book, Dupuy's most sustained targets are not productivist working-class unions, however, but contemporary apologists for the violence of capitalist markets. Their responsibility is carefully contextualized – they are seen as symptoms rather than the source of the problem. Nonetheless, after citing Milton Friedman's glowing description of capitalism as a society of mutual indifference, Dupuy observes:

This utopia of a society where the men would neither need to speak to each other nor to love another to live together, where mutual indifference and the withdrawal into the self would be the best guarantors of the common good, is so monstrous that one tells oneself that only a very strong motive could result in this (utopia) coming into existence and being taken seriously by so many great minds (p.64).

The future of the economy and of economics – the title in French *L'avenir de l'économie* is deliberately ambiguous (p.23) – may also be read as the future *according to* economics. The future of humanity imagined by Friedmanite economics replaces human beings with “zombies” that are without potentially destructive passions and rivalries but without meaningful humanity either.

Indeed, Dupuy argues that this perverse vision is not far from the apocalyptic world Günther Anders foresaw, “the image of a paradise inhabited by murderers without wickedness and by victims without hate” (p.66).

Dupuy's salutary denunciation of the horrors of mainstream economic thinking is, however, simply the beginning of what is an existential call for radical social change towards a more human world. Historical materialists ought to be sympathetic at once to this demasking of the moral and imaginative poverty of economics and to the call for profound social transformation through struggle that will be political, not “expert” and technocratic.

But it would be a disservice to Dupuy to say that socialists should read him because he has a congenial message. Rather, they should read him because it is rare to be stimulated by a thinker as original as Dupuy. He takes seriously insights from sources ranging from the neglected Adam Smith of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2002) to Greek myths to the Bible. He is not afraid to tackle the biggest questions that we face today, including an “economystified” world in which economic rationality seeps into the pores of every aspect of life. He frontally addresses the ongoing, arguably heightened military menace of an atomic holocaust and the already-unfolding ecological disaster. He offers a lucid and therefore justifiably anxious look at the world in which we live, one that posits mimetic human violence – rather than kindness or sympathy – as one of the major engines of past and contemporary social life.

But Dupuy's analysis does not stop with this apocalyptic vision. Instead, he reminds us that we all face the coming catastrophe of our own deaths and, on a bigger scale, the inevitable death of the world capitalist relations that now shape our lives. The urgency is to realize this for ourselves and for all of humanity, so that we can decide – not what we want to do but what we *need* to do – with the time that remains to us before our inevitable deaths and the inevitable death of capitalism. We need to be fatalists but only to seize life more fully, individually and together. In summing up his own argument, Dupuy justifiably concludes: “No, decidedly, fatalism is not there where one thinks” (p.268).

References

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