Measuring Life: Notes Toward an Impossible Exchange

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We are fast approaching the end of any outside. All matter, including life itself, is being construed as calculable, computable; subject to commodification and exchange. The proliferation of graphs, statistics and curves representing lives saved and lives lost, in real time, discloses the signifying order of a capitalist totality, wherein the Economy has replaced the world in its entirety, everything is written 'inside', and all that is inside is reduced to a financial problem.

In contrast, albeit by way of the same logic, the Economy figures in mainstream public discourse as living matter, a human body. Official state rhetoric locates ‘economic health’ at its center; which alas Butler, is a “life-taking figuration”, insofar as protecting the health of the economy has relied on sacrificing/rendering expendable human lives. In its overt forms, it manifests through the ‘life-taking’ instruments of the carceral state and capitalist expropriation. In its more fugitive forms, it operates via healthcare systems and economies that 'let die'.

We may borrow a term from the context of the financial crisis of 2008: the ‘life-taking grammar’. This is the grammar which governs the operation of the financial system and its relation to the real economy. It is a system that produces ‘corporate’ lives (lives of profit) and ‘human’ lives (lives of loss). The term ‘life-taking’ refers to the way in which the financial system operates to take lives away from people (and society) in order to protect the financial system itself. This is done through a variety of mechanisms, including the use of financial instruments (such as derivatives and Credit Default Swaps) which can be used to create and transfer risk, and the use of financial markets (such as the bond and stock markets) which can be used to precise and quantify the value of lives.

In its more fugitive forms, this life-taking grammar operates via the healthcare system and economies that 'let die'. This is the grammar of ‘euthanasia’ and ‘assisted suicide’, which are used to take lives away from people in order to protect the financial system itself. This is done through a variety of mechanisms, including the use of financial instruments (such as derivatives and Credit Default Swaps) which can be used to create and transfer risk, and the use of financial markets (such as the bond and stock markets) which can be used to precise and quantify the value of lives.

Underpinning calls to “go back to normal” and restart the world/Economy is therefore a necropolitical grammar, informed by the very same epistemology driving computational escalation. Both rely on a 'knowledge program' or signifying order that renders everything as measurable, and deploys measurement and classification to establish 'truth' and assign value. The reference point for this procedure of measurement is a Universal that affirms its own author as 'human', of 'intrinsic value'; the White/European. As it unfolds through a social and spatial configuration that entangles colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy, this modern syntax produces a ‘scene of value’, that is essentially a ‘scene of obliteration’. Against a backdrop of scarcity and excess, a distribution of resources via these vectors of power morphs into a distribution of total violence, or 'sacrificial possibilities'. In its overt forms, it manifests through the 'life-taking' expropriation of the carceral state and capitalist expropriation. In its more fugitive forms, it operates via healthcare systems and economies that 'let die'.

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Act I
Against this deployment of total violence, how to bring about the restoration of total value.\(^6\)

To the extent that we engage with the capitalist economy as a totalizing force, we acknowledge that all that is within this totality is a site of contestation, including the very tools of calculation and measurement that produce the world as we know it. What the state of things then demands is a radical redefinition of the calculable/incalculable and a counter epistemology that makes possible a new mode of measurement and a conception of value that desacralizes things, peripheralizes The Economy and affirms the powers of life.
Market supply and demand under the capitalist mode of production is based on the exploitation of two of its very essential components: the value of labour and natural 'resources', both denoting lives that are excluded from the equation of production, growth and profit. The commodification of life and nature was and continues to be a product of colonial practices based on othering and exploitation in a market society that subjects human lives, natural resources, and ecosystems to its logic.

The development of the computer resonates with this rationalist approach that reduces the world into numbers. The stronger the computer, the bigger its storage, the higher its capacity to turn objects into digits. The design of today's undersea fiber-optic cables- the very architecture of the Internet- is based on colonial trade routes. They function in a similar but more sophisticated manner. These submarine cables have given way to Big Data, a systematic mode of complex extraction and transportation of information. This technology has been leveraged to reproduce ininitely a neoliberal world view through an ideology of Solutionism – or the usage of algorithms and technology to fix/solve real world problems. From Bacteria to Unions, Solutionism is undermining life intelligence, as it converts life to an infinite equation backed by Big Data, providing solutions to everything -sometimes before a problem is even identified:

Refugees, here is an app  
Genocide, here is an app  
Famine, here is an app  
Pandemic, here is an app  
Climate catastrophe, here is an app

This arrogant ideology of the tech industry implies that any human problem can be solved technologically: be it social, ecological, economic or political. Human Rights Industry to Disaster Management. Solutions are offered by those who created the problems in the first place. They reproduce one more in an interminable loop.

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In May 2020, in a car TV show focusing on Tesla’s upcoming Cybertruck, Elon Musk stated “We want to be the leader in apocalypse technology”. A few months later, in July 2020, the Emirates launched its Hope Mars Mission, which according to the project manager, Omran Sharaf, is seen as integral to the country’s long-term economic development. “It is about the future of the UAE and our survival,” Sharaf said. In a TEDx talk titled “Why we should go to Mars” Sharaf elaborates: “It’s a very simple answer. The Stone Age didn’t end because we ran out of stone. The Stone Age ended because of progress. And the Oil Age will not end because we ran out of oil. It will end because of progress. It’s about the future of the country... It’s about survival.”

These survival narratives and fake futures are selling out the world before it ends, they predict a problem that they engendered. But as the ongoing ecological crisis and current pandemic have shown us: smart systems, deep learning, machinic thinking, artificial intelligence... are all systems of abstraction. They cannot and do not want to deal with meaning.

Life outside the totality of the screen is unexchangeable. It is a futile exchange.
Act III

With the infrastructures of a liveable life on the verge of total collapse

Perpetually failing to meet their most basic requirements

And [human] and [non-human] life forcefully devaluated, privatised and militarised

Increasingly vulnerable and precarious

Can we rethink this mode of being in the world in grasping with the state of life itself? Taking it as a point of departure to pursue other ways of living that are grounded in our common existence, and the politics of a shared condition where the Body tends to reaffirm its existence with and through other bodies/beings. Bodies that need, desire and depend on each other in order to survive.

Vulnerability and precarity are reappropriated as a site of reconfiguration, toward a political framework premised on the concept of collective exchange. Where cooperation is a mode of living/resisting, and new modes of collective agency and Radical [Co] belonging germinate around concepts of mutuality and reciprocity. Imagining different forms of a life ‘in common’ that enable an interdependence that expresses our communal will and collective thought.

Against an understanding of vulnerability and resistance as mutually contradictory, we move in pursuit of a narrative sequence where:

“We are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance.”

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