

Five literary precedents for an alternative economy

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As a remedy for the degeneration of life-value through its economization, Brian Massumi (2018) proposes an alternative economic model where qualitative differentials would be able to play out freely without being reduced to profit. The following five literary precedents feature each a particular perversion of normative economic capture, and hint to how their anomaly came to be. Together they help speculate on the possible implications and spatial requirements of the participants to such an upside-down system as Massumi's proposal.

Ian McEwan, Reversalism

In his satire *The Cockroach*, Ian McEwan (2019) surrogates Brexit for the fantastical idea of Reversalism, whose advocates argue for reversing the flow of money in all exchange. Instead of receiving wage employees would pay for their jobs, and shops would hand money to their customers. The higher one's income was before, the more vigorously one would need to buy goods to sustain it. Firms on the other hand would compete to hire most high paying employees to pay for their customers and clients. 'Hotel managers bring in the [...] best trumpet player in the best orchestra in town, so that the hotel can afford its guests. The next day, after a successful gig at the dance floor, the trumpeter will have to shop intensely in order to pay for his next appearance. Full employment is the result.' (McEwan, 2019, p. 28)

Part of the story's comic effect comes from making the reader seriously consider, if only for a moment, the implications of such a daft idea. Perhaps unintended, it feels like the concept has potential to unravel much further than the novel gives it space to. The idea of reversing the flow of the entire economy is more titillating to consider for its real world ramifications than simply for its quality of absurdity and analogue to Brexit. Passages about the changing dynamics between workers and employers, consumers and producers reveal things about the current affairs that might be difficult to realize otherwise. What new antagonisms might emerge in place of labour and capital? How might such a system coexist with the current world economy?

At the very latest the reverse flow halts at national borders, where foreign trading partners might accept payment along free goods, but not be willing to do the same. Even less likely would be for foreign creditors to approve the reversal of their debt. In the story this does not matter because the scheme is a conspiracy from the beginning, but it would be interesting to push the ridiculous though a little further. Foreign exchange for example would need some kind of a customs duty with a sleight of hand to inverse the flow back to 'clockwise' direction. British exports to France would be sent with a Reversalist payment, but retained at the border until an equivalent import from France, where it would be accepted as if associated with the goods.

By compensating for consumption and charging for employment, the scheme inadvertently recognises that work is often more valuable from the two, but takes advantage of a confusion of terms. Work is more than labour, and leisure is more than consumption. Work comprises all kind of production from art to sports that people already pay to perform and learn in gyms, pottery studios and schools. We think of this work more as a consumption of a service, because we recognise that it is as vital for human becoming. The service only maintains the opportunity for its performance. Reversalism would threaten to subsume this vital production fully in the same category as employment, making it a privilege that only the most inventive 'consumers' could

afford while the rest settle for menial tasks with minimal value for self-expression. The most well paying consumption would likely be then most profitable for its providers, namely of advertising and marketing.

Jonathan Swift, Academy of Lagado

Perhaps the original precedent of Reversalism can be found in Gulliver's Voyage to Laputa (Rawson, 2005) and the experiments of the Academy of Lagado. Situated in the capital of the fictional nation of Balnibarbi, the Academy receives unlimited funds for conducting the most outlandish and far-fetched experiments. In one of its over five hundred rooms an academic – or a Projector as they call themselves – has spent seven years extracting sun light out of cucumbers in order to warm cooler summers. In another chamber an architect presents a technique for building houses starting from the roof and proceeding down to foundation. Next door an artist attempts to produce colourful silk from spiders by feeding them dyed flies. Common to all Projectors' breakthroughs is that the resources required by the new methods always outweigh the improvement on their intended application.

In a wing dedicated to Advancers of Speculative Knowledge Gulliver finds a more ambitious project: a machine for generating text. According to the Projector, with this '[...] Contrivance, the most ignorant Person at a reasonable Charge, and with a little bodily Labour, may write Books in Philosophy, Poetry, Politicks, Law, Mathematicks and Theology, without the least Assistance from Genius or Study.' (2005, p. 171) The machine is composed of a grid of inscribed wooden blocks, connected to each other by wires. By rotating levers situated at the edge of the frame, the blocks will rearrange themselves to form words that the Projector's disciples then transcribe and assemble into volumes. The description inspired Daniel Liebeskin's 1985 Venice Biennale installation titled the Writing Machine, where the blocks feature topography and drawing.

Here the humorous contradiction would be the Projector understanding literature to be valuable even as clutter of arbitrary words. To make sense of the output of the machine, the fragmented sentences need to be identified and collated: an effort that could be spent in actually writing. Yet the apparatus does have some value in producing connections its users might not come up with otherwise. Writing is only valuable for the ability to exteriorize and memory through time, and the hypomnesic regime it stabilizes. In this sense the apparatus could be thought of as a primitive symbolic machine, as Stiegler (2014) calls technical individuals that short-circuit knowledge.

David Foster Wallace, progressive sales tax

In one of the freestanding chapters of David Foster Wallace's (2011) unfinished novel Pale King, a tax accountant reminisces of a fictional experiment with progressive sales tax in Illinois in 1977. In an attempt to increase revenues without unfair strain on low-income, the State Treasurer's Office imposed higher tax rates on larger purchases: rates of 3.5% on purchases under \$5.00, 6% on under \$20.00, 6.8% on under \$42.01, and 8.5% on anything above. The policy however failed to assume a crucial taxing principle, namely that the product of the tax base of a progressive rate cannot be something easily subdividable into smaller purchases, as is the case with sales. As a result consumers would split purchases into so many smaller ones to fit under the smaller tax bracket. Grocery shoppers would buy their food in little bags under 5 dollars, running back and forth between their cars and the shop, while drivers would attempt to fill their tanks at gas stations \$4.9 worth of petrol at a time. Soon businesses from realtors to car dealers would advertise subdividable payments as a feature, offering cars or mortgages as agglomerations of thousands of separate \$4.99 transactions. The explosion in the number of sales would overwhelm the Revenue Service's data processing capacity and force the state to abort the experiment only four months after initiation. In the end the practical cost ended up heavier than the calculated benefit. In economics the decrease of overall surplus caused by an intervention on efficient market is called deadweight loss. It occurs often if a monopoly situation or a tax creates price ceilings

or floors. In the novel the loss would affect mostly people with low wage, whose time has a higher utility when spent on avoiding the increased tax.

Carl Schmitt, Buribunks

In his satirical science fiction essay *Die Buribunken*, Carl Schmitt (2019) describes a society of individuals who dedicate their lives to the recording, publishing and categorizing of their own thoughts. Equipped with typewriters, the titular Buribunks carry this task by writing a never-ending diary of their every living moment. Each day these diaries are collected to a vast archive and processed according to content, personal index, and geography, so that for example a psychologist seeking to study the dreams of any social class at any age or time could easily access the relevant entries. Crucially, the archives are also completely transparent and accessible to all citizens. Buribunks are expected to take pride over their work, competing in popular reviews and journals (that they presumably read in tandem with writing). Neither is there any coercion regarding the content of their writing. In fact, expressions of disaffection are some of the most highly appreciated types of entries. The only real imperative of Buribunkdom is to keep writing and developing entries, even if to insult and condemn the rules themselves. To actually stop producing, however, amounts to a civic ruin equivalent to death. The perpetrator who is no longer seen or heard becomes irrelevant and is soon forgotten.

That abstinence from production is seen to abuse 'intellectual openness' indicates that to an extent Buribunks consider unwritten thought to already belong to others. To omit writing is to deprive others of the part of oneself, which already virtually belongs to them. This is in line with Simondon's (in Stiegler, 2014) conception of transindividual as a process of collective, psychic and technical becoming. In Buribunkdom the preindividual share is so strongly perceived as larger than the individuated, that reluctance to resolve it collectively is seen not only a limitation to the concerned individual, but a direct assault to the potential individuations of all others. As the narrator explains, 'thinking is nothing but silent speech; speech is nothing but writing without script; writing is nothing but anticipated publication.' (Schmitt in Kittler, 1986, p. 241) We could add that publication is nothing but potential readership, identical with the thinking it provokes in others, which again is nothing but further publication. In a sense Buribunkdom could be seen as a highly participatory transindividual, where life only begins at the stroke of a letter. The Buribunk's living experience and memory is so closely synchronised with their writing, that there is no meaningful interiority separate from the machine. Neither can there be any thought or experience separate from publication.

The manic recording and storing of information resembles the current mnemotechnological epoch. By submitting their entries Buribunks update the archive of their personal shifts through categories much like market segments today, as well as the shifting of the segments themselves. But where Buribunks armed with typewriters have to actually pay attention to their production, our technologies allow it to occur anywhere and anytime. Often we are not aware of it, don't understand the motivations, or even consider it inconsequential when it is the driving force in the development of those technics. This makes us susceptible to manipulation by those who do understand its significance. For Buribunks not to fall prey to similar manipulation it would be crucial for not only the archive to be transparent, but also the means of its selection and publication, the bottleneck of their feedback cycle. How Buribunks practically access other individuals' diaries is left ambiguous in the story, but would be definitive in practice.

The archive itself is centrally controlled, but states as its mission to '[...] ensure that the interest of the Buribunk in himself and in the quintessentially Buribunkic does not become mere decorum.' (Schmitt in Kittler, 1986, p. 239) In other words the selection strives to keep individuals invested in the continuous process of exteriorization. Here the technic of writing is crucial: The typewriter is not a technical individual and cannot exclude anyone from participating. Buribunks are fully aware of their undertaking to the point where their every effort goes into the very contemplation of this awareness: there is no other activity in reference to which manipulation could even occur. Conversely there is nothing to prevent Buribunks from developing more

nuanced organology. Homogenization is only initially necessary to make all individuals capable of participating and producing comparable information. As the techniques of transmission and categorization improve, one should be able to paint, sing, and dance in an equally Buribunkic manner. It would be interesting to see what change computational technologies would bring; would Buribunkdom devolve into one chat room with real time ranking of popularity, or would authors exercise self-constraint to develop refined entries.

Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener*

In the essay *Barleby; or, The Formula* Deleuze (1993) meditates on the character of Bartleby from Hermann Melville's short story. A clerk employed to copy legal documents, Bartleby one day interrupts his work with an enigmatic utterance, 'I would prefer not to'. This phrase, Deleuze argues, when repeated in the patient and flat manner of Bartleby, has the force of an agrammatical formula. Agrammaticality here means that the phrase stands at the limit of a series of correct expressions, without being subsumed into any. While technically correct in construction, it twists the rules of language in a way that grants it a destructive power in a given context. In the legal office this power strips the narrating attorney from his authority over Bartleby, launching the two into a standoff. The attorney is unable to extract a coherent answer from Bartleby, who becomes immobile to the point of never leaving the office. Driven into ever-stranger propositions and behaviour, the attorney is finally forced to move out of his own office, and Bartleby is sent to prison.

The power of the agrammatic formula draws from severing the references and assumptions that speech always carries about the person who speaks. Deleuze notes that to speak is not only to indicate things and actions, but an act itself that reassures a relation with the speaker in a respective situation. These speech acts are self-referential: one commands by saying 'I order you to', or promises by 'I promise you that' (prefers by 'I prefer to'). By neither negating nor affirming the attorney's demands, Bartleby manages to conceive a kind of language within a language that the attorney has to receive, but cannot address. The formula advances only to retreat into that advance. Because the attempts to bring Bartleby back to reason rely on a presupposed expectation of obeying, they have no effect on this shield of indeterminacy. Most importantly, by initiating the formula Bartleby becomes unable to continue even what he was supposed to prefer doing. The formula '[...] not only abolishes the term it refers to, and that it rejects, but also abolishes the other term it seemed to preserve, and that becomes impossible.' Bartleby moves beyond any existing or referred to particularity, a kind of purgatory that the attorney cannot reach. At the same time the indeterminacy is Bartleby's only way of survival. Both refusal and acceptance would equally validate the interlocutor of the attorney, returning Bartleby under the influence of his speech acts. Instead Bartleby balances in the narrow gap outside of the options, preferring to not have an opinion.

The loss of social status by abstinence has much in common with the Buribunk who refuses to write. Only with the formula Bartleby has found a way of refusing to participate by means of participation, which greatly prolongs his eventual ruin. This prolongation is crucial for the story because it allows the attorney to witness the ordeal as it accelerates from a small incident to its full extent. His role, like that of Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* as Deleuze argues, is to be the particular who recognises the singularity of the original and lives to retell of it. Had the attorney been someone less thorough, the formula's genius would have gone unnoticed. Similarly had Bartleby simply become silent or remained at home, there would not have been anything to write of. To have full effect Bartleby's rebellion needs both the preciseness ambiguity of the formula and the insistence of the attorney.

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