

In praise of the parasite: The dark organizational theory of Michel Serres

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Abstract

Michel Serres' concept of 'the parasite' provides for a sustained rethinking of basic categories in human social science. As an example of post-Kantian philosophy, Serres critiques the classical logic of identity as based on a 'third man' argument. This third space – personified as the parasite – is essential to thinking communication and transformation in systems. Parasitism operates through the logic of taking without giving or 'abuse value'. But the parasite nevertheless makes exchange possible by creating connections between otherwise incommensurable forms of ordering. Human relations oscillate through period of disequilibrium, often involving scapegoating and exclusion, as parasitic cascades emerge. However, parasites in the form of jokers and quasi-objects create powerful mechanisms for creating collectivity and individuality. The 'dark organizational theory' of Serres allows for adequate descriptions of these processes.

Keywords: Michel Serres; Parasite; Actor-Network Theory; Quasi-objects; Theoretical Biology; Organization Theory

Introduction

The thermal images were taken late at night. They showed the tents pitched by Occupy London Stock Exchange outside of St Paul's cathedral. The newspaper article in the Daily Mail – who had commissioned an 'independent thermal imaging company' to take the pictures – offered this helpful guide to readers attempting to understand the multicoloured smudges:

In these shots, taken late on Monday night, the presence of body heat from humans is represented by yellow and red inside the tents. The tents that are coloured purple indicate they are colder and thus empty. The buildings behind are also yellow and red because of the higher temperatures inside. (Daily Mail, 26th October 2011)

Taken together, the images appeared to show the majority of the tents as purple, meaning that they were not heated by body warmth and 'thus empty'. What could be the relevance of such a complex (and highly contestable) chain of reasoning? The article proceeded to explain that 'the images suggest the vast majority of the demonstrators who gather around the cathedral to denounce capitalism during the day go home or to a hotel to stay warm at night' (ibid). The conclusion being that Occupy London Stock Exchange was in effect running 'an almost entirely part time protest' (ibid).

As a newspaper, the Daily Mail has a longstanding and explicit right-wing agenda. It is a champion of the neoliberal free-market politics that have created and continue to support the activities of London based financial markets and banks, despite the overwhelming evidence of manifold failings of the latter. The newspaper is certainly no friend of the Occupy movement. But what the Daily

Mail loves even more than neoliberalism is exposing hypocrisy. How can these protestors expect us to take them seriously when they sit in their tents with their premium brand takeaway coffees, sending tweets from their smart phones, and then retreating home at night to sleep in their comfortable beds? They say they want to dismantle capitalism, but they indulge themselves in all that it offers. They say they want another world, but they do not have the courage of their convictions. They are not an opposition: they are parasites. They take what capitalism offers and give nothing in return.

Hypocrisy is a serious accusation. The hypocrite says one thing, yet does another. They claim to hold one position, one belief, and yet act as though they cleave to a very different set of views. They cannot be trusted because they cannot be pinned down – we do not know what to believe about them. Worse still, the hypocrite allows themselves the luxuries and rights that they would deny others. In doing so they take without giving back. They help themselves to what they system has to offer whilst denouncing it in public.

The logic on which this accusation is based is very ancient. It is the logic of identity, non-contradiction and mutual exclusivity. One is either for or against. One either believes or disbelieves. No middle ground is possible. Propositions are either necessarily true or necessarily false. The Occupy movement is either against capitalism or for capitalism. And this must be as a whole, for there can be no equivocation, no tolerance of ambiguity. To lack determination here is simply hypocrisy – a violation of both sound logic and strong moral precepts.

But this logic is faulty. It assumes a stability and an identity in respect to the world to which its propositions refer that is supported by neither history nor, indeed, contemporary journalism. It implicitly relies upon there being a position from which judgments about the exclusivity and non-contradictory nature of propositions can be made that is never specified or directly articulated. Perhaps most importantly, it is a logic which runs entirely counter to the received common wisdom of contemporary mathematics, in particular set theory and 'fuzzy logic'.

What kind of logic ought we instead to turn to in order to make sense of the claims leveled against the Occupy movement? In this paper I will describe how the work of Michel Serres, in particular his book *The Parasite*, provides a set of concepts for thinking indeterminacy and transformation in social systems. Rather than simply rejecting the idea of parasitism (and hypocrisy) as mere empty insults, Serres' work allows us to revalorise the terms in such a way that they can be seen as essential to an adequate understanding of how what we call the social is ordered. In fact it allows us to consider social ordering as just one instance of a wider set of operations and logics that are at work across all living organisms and systems. As we will see, the parasite is not an exception, a violation of sound logical and moral principles, but rather their very condition.

Foundations

The terms postmodernism and post-structuralism are often used in characterizing the dominant trends in European social-cultural theory over the

past three decades and the corresponding philosophical resources that they have typically drawn upon (e.g. Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze). It would be more accurate to describe the problematic that is being responded to here as essentially post-Kantian, involving the elimination of transcendence. If Kant offers critique as the solution to the excesses of both dualism and empiricism, then it comes at the cost of reinforcing a transcendental dimension to human affairs that resists further specification.

For social-cultural theory this takes the form of what Donna Haraway (1991) famously referred to as a 'God trick': at the heart of theory there are a set of categories that claim to provide foundations, objectivity and the grounds for good judgment, whilst denying their own contingency and partial nature relative to a specific epistemic formation. The post-Kantian move is to subject such categories to relentless deconstruction in order to shift the work of analysis towards terms and propositions that are clearly situated in locally contingent – and hence contestable – epistemic practices.

The effect of this strategy is to produce 'flat' versions of social order in which possible sources of dualism and transcendence have been eliminated. For example, the distinction between agents and structure is problematic because it implies a third transcendental position underpinning social order from which the distinction between individual agents and impersonal structures is produced (or 'miraculated' as Deleuze would put it). This leads to an automatic and tautological partitioning of the empirical field in advance of analysis that leaves the sources of agency uninspected (eg. agents have agency because they are agents, structure does not have agency because it is what is 'not-agent'). By contrast, an approach such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) attributes agency to whatever entities may be seen to act within a given empirical field, and renders structures as the connections and pathways (i.e. networks) that emerge between these generalized agents.

Theories such as ANT draw on a philosophical tradition that attempts to bypass Kantianism (see for example Deleuze & Guattari's 1994 'geophilosophy'). Major figures in this alternative history of western philosophy include Spinoza and Leibniz, who each, in their own particular way, articulated a form of monism or non-transcendental philosophical foundations. Traditional distinctions, such as between subject and object, or social and technical, have no place here. Whilst such approaches deprive social-cultural theory of its ability to make a priori distinctions between, for example, human and non-human agents, they are richly instructive in their strategies for analyzing order as an emergent effect of 'supra-empirical' processes (for instance, the affective encounters between bodies-in-relations in Spinoza's work).

However post (and pre-) Kantianism encounters a particular difficulty in its thinking of the relation between the one and the multiple. If there is no outside, no transcendental aspect to the monadic field in which individual entities are situated, then from what position is the distinction between individuality and multiplicity to be accomplished, without an endless regress where these terms collapse into one another? Deleuze & Guattari (1988) once described this

position as the 'magic formula we all seek – PLURALISM=MONISM' (p.20). The word formula is no accident here. The post-Kantian tradition has often turned to mathematics and theoretical physics for inspiration, be it Henri Bergson's (1913/2001) use of distinctions between extensive and intensive multiplicities or Alain Badiou's (2008) more recent explorations of set theory.

The place of the work of Michel Serres in this tradition is complex. Despite having written around sixty books, Serres has by any conceivable criterion been far less influential than peers such as Foucault and Deleuze. Although he has been and remains a prodigious author (averaging a book a year for the past four decades), only a small minority of his work has been translated from his native French. This relative neglect of his work, particular in Anglophone scholarship, has often been remarked upon (Paulson, 1997), and despite numerous attempts to provide introductory routes into his work for a broader audience (see Serres with Latour, 1995; Abbas, 2005; Assad, 1999; Brown, 2002; Connor, 2009; Latour, 1987), there is little evidence that the situation is likely to change dramatically.

Why then should we trouble ourselves to make sense of concepts from Serres' work, such as that of the parasite? I argue that we need to do so because, unlike many of his contemporaries, Serres has systematically engaged with the key problems of human and social sciences from a post-Kantian perspective. He offers a genuinely transdisciplinary approach to thinking issues such as the distribution of human and non-human agency in a way which does not re-instate the priority and authority of philosophy (hence his influence on ANT). Moreover, Serres work has always been engaged with social issues, be it the threat of ecological disaster in *The Natural Contract* or the transformation of human relations through information communication technologies in *Angels*. Post Kantian social and human science can therefore stand to gain much by following his treatment of collectivity, individuality and thinking the relation itself.

Communication

Take a basic problem. There are two entities – A and B – between which we sketch out a relation. They could be two people passing each other on the street, two organizations passing electronic messages, or the conflict between a protest group and a right wing tabloid newspaper. How is communication possible here? In classical terms we would begin by defining the identity of each entity, what each is and is not, before going on to determine the possible form of their relationship.

But this would immediately present us with a problem. To establish the identity of A such that $A=A$, we need to make a contrast with everything that is 'not A', which includes B (and likewise to determine the identity of B). This results in a fundamental asymmetry – from A's perspective, B's message emanates from a world which is fundamentally determined by its quality of being 'not A' (with the converse true of B's perspective). We do not have a relation of equal partners, but rather two incommensurable perspectives on the world defined by mutual exclusivity (like the slumbering monads described by Leibniz). Once again – how is communication possible here?

The solution, which is ostensibly forbidden by classical logic, but which actually forms its grounds, is to point to a third element. This could be the medium in which A and B are jointly situated (e.g. the street, the internet, a public forum). Or it might be a further entity – C – who serves as an intermediary. It is not crucial to establish whether this third element is medium or being. We need only recognize that in order to understand the communication between A and B we need a form of mediation, a third space or as Serres (1982b) sometimes calls it a 'third man'.

The 'third man' is the space that is automatically required to make communication possible – 'a third exists before the other ... I have to go through the middle before reaching the end. There is always a mediate, a middle, and intermediary' (Serres, 1982a: 57). If this third did not exist we would have to treat A and B as either utterly incommensurable or as completely identical. The introduction of the third is the point of exchange, the crossroads through which communication happens. Serres calls this third 'the parasite'.

First definition of the parasite – to one side of ('para') the location of the event ('site') – the medium or being through which communication must pass

Together, the three elements (A, B and the third, the parasite) form a system. This system is not harmonious since the messages that pass between A and B occur through the parasite, which introduces something of their own into the exchange. From the perspectives of either A or B, this represents 'noise', something added to the 'signal' that is sent from one to the other. And yet without this noise that naturally occurs by virtue of the presence of the parasite, no signal would be possible in the first place. This creates an elegant paradox:

Given, two stations and a channel. They exchange messages. If the relation succeeds, it is perfect, optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed. It is only mediation. Relation is nonrelation. And that is what the parasite is. The channel carries the flow, but it cannot disappear as a channel, and it brakes (breaks) the follow, more or less. (Serres, 1982a 79)

Communication depends upon mediation – the channel, the parasite. But it must also simultaneously 'repress' the fact of this mediation to be successful, to appear immediate. This is the classic paradox of mediation, we 'forget' the medium in order to focus on the message. The closest parallel here is with the experience of our own bodies. When the body functions well, we are able to ignore it. It is only when it breaks down in some way, when we become ill, that the fundamental mediation of life by the body becomes apparent – 'health is the silence of the organs' (ibid, p.197).

The introduction of noise by the parasite has an interesting effect on the system. Serres relies upon a proposition made by the biophysicist Henri Atlan (1974). In a living system, a message passed from A to B consists of a mixture of signal and

noise. From the perspective of A, the noise is extraneous, a threat to the successful reception of the signal. But from the perspective of B, this mixture of signal and noise need not necessarily be grasped in the same way. Noise 'cuts' the signal in such a way that what is received is very different from what was sent. To put this in a different context, when we listen to what another says, we also take in the hesitations, the changes in emphasis, the slips of the tongue in what they say. For the speaker these are all just 'noise' to be overcome. But for us, as listener, these may significantly alter our understanding of what is being said. Noise and signal are differentially distributed depending on the position one occupies in a communicative set up.

Serres likens this effect to that of a ringing telephone at a dinner party. The host and guests are sat enjoying their conversation when the noise of the telephone begins outside the room. At first the host tries to ignore this interruption, but eventually it becomes unbearable. She crosses the threshold and picks up the receiver. Now the conversation next door becomes the noise that is disturbing the call, at least until it is completed – 'If I approach the table, the noise becomes conversation. In the system, noise and message exchange roles according to the position of the observer and the action of the actor' (Serres, 1982a: 66).

Second definition of the parasite – the 'static' that interrupts the transmission of a message

We began with the problem of communication between two entities, and rapidly arrived at a description of a message-bearing system passing by way of a third element, the parasite – 'as soon as we are two, we are already three or four' (ibid p.57). The parasite plays a dual role in the system. It makes communication possible by acting as the mediational means. But it also necessarily disrupts the message, in the same way that static affects radio transmissions. This disruption is not entirely negative – it transforms the nature of the message depending on the position of the receiver and their activities.

For Serres, an adequate description of such a system cannot simply focus on the communicative partners and the message (as is typically done in social network theory, for instance). It must also include the role of the parasite:

Stations and paths together form a system. Points and line, beings and relations. What is interesting might be the construction of the system, the number and disposition of stations and paths. Or it might be the flow of messages passing through the lines ... But one must also write as well of the interceptions, of the accidents in the flow along the way between stations – of changes and metamorphoses. (Serres, 1982a: 11)

Parasitism is integral to the functioning of the system. We might say that 'systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential to functioning' (ibid p.79). We must study these interceptions and breakdowns as a kind of subterranean rationality that is at work in the very constitution of the system itself – the 'dark side of the system' (ibid p.12).

Exchange

La Fontaine told a version of a fable derived from Aesop called The City Rat and the Country Rat. The city rat invites their simple country cousin to visit so that he can sample fine living. Together they eat the leftovers of a feast held at the home of a tax farmer – ‘oil, butter, ham, bacon, cheese – everything is available’ (Serres, 1982a: 3). But as they eat there is a loud noise, a disturbance at the door. The cousins flee and hide from the noise. This is all too much for the country rat, who returns home, where the food is not so fancy, but at least one does not live in continuous fear.

Third definition of the parasite – the uninvited guest or ‘social’ parasite

Serres repeats this fable as the pre-eminent example of how the parasite takes without giving. Parasitism appears to be a one-way relationship. The host provides, supplies hospitality, which the parasite takes without giving anything back in return. Or at least they continue to do this until they are discovered and driven out – in this case by the noise behind the door that forces them to abandon their meal in fear. Hospitality becomes hostility as the parasite is driven out.

What is particularly interesting in the tale of the two rats is that there are actually several acts of parasitism linked together. The tax farmer is not the producer of the fine goods that have been served at the feast. He is a parasite. The tax farmer is parasitized by the city rat, who is in turn parasitized by the country rat. In this way parasites are organised in a progressive chain or cascade where ‘the parasite parasitizes the parasites’ (ibid p.55). Although the parasite is weaker than the host, and must exercise continuous vigilance for the sudden transformation of hospitality to hostility (as the country rat is shocked to discover), they are nearly always smaller than the host, often to the point of near invisibility. In practice the parasite ‘has but one enemy: the one who can replace him in his position of parasite’ (ibid p.107).

Although the parasite appears to take without giving back, this is not strictly accurate in most cases. Consider the uninvited guest who draws up their chair to the dinner table. They ‘pay’ for their meal not with coins, but rather with their conviviality and fine story telling – ‘he obtains the roast and pays for it with stories’ (ibid p.36). This is an exchange of sorts, albeit an apparently unequal one. This raises the obvious question of why a host would tolerate such a deal?

Serres explains this by marking a distinction between production and information. Unlike predators, who consume their prey whole, the parasite does not exhaust production. It would be better to say that the parasite parasitizes reproduction, the propagation of production, rather than production per se. The parasite redirects reproduction, it steers it in a new direction favourable to it. Serres liken this to the addition of information to energy. He tells the fable of ‘the blind man and the cripple’, where one has energy without information and the other has the converse capacities. When the paralyzed man is hoisted onto the blind man’s shoulders they make a new whole – a ‘crossed association of the material and the logical, and exchange of the solid for a voice’ (ibid p.36).

The parasite is a selector, a point of decision where a new diagonal path is established that redirects the flow of production. To raw production, they add information, creating a new direction for a system. In another fable, a hungry wretch wanders beneath the window of a restaurant kitchen. They savour the delicious smells coming from within, and their hunger feels somewhat satiated. But an outraged kitchen assistant observes this act and rushes out demanding payment. Before the dispute can come to blows, a third person arrives. They propose to resolve the argument in the following way:

Give me a coin, he said. The wretch did so, frowning. He put the coin down on the sidewalk and with the heel of his shoe made it ring a bit. This noise, he said, giving his decision, is pay enough for the aroma of the tasty dishes. (Serres, 1982a: 34-5)

Here is an unequal exchange – a sound pays for a smell. But it is still an exchange of sorts where previously no exchange at all was possible. Normally a substance (food) is exchanged with another substance (coin). But here the parasite, the third man, finds a way of crossing this exchange with another. The sound of the coin pays for the smell of the meal. In doing so they create something new, novelty appears in the system, an unexpected channel for communication is opened – ‘the parasite invents something new. Since he does not eat like everyone else, he builds a new logic’ (ibid p.35).

The parasite does make a contribution to the host whom it parasitizes. It provides information and novelty in exchange for energy and production. Serres argues that this kind of exchange is fundamental to economics and to human relations. The human is the ultimate ‘universal parasite’ who turns ‘everything and everyone around him’ into a ‘hospitable space’ (ibid p.24). At the origin of human society we find this parasitic logic of taking without giving – ‘man milks the cow, makes the steer work, makes a roof from the tree; they have all decided who the parasite it’ (ibid p.24). Before the human even begins to enter into pre-capitalist relations of exchange, we find unequal exchange. Thus ‘abuse value’ comes before ‘use value’. The parasite is not the corruptor of exchange relations, but rather their very foundation:

The parasite adopts a functional role; the host survives the parasite’s abuses of him – he even survives in the literal sense of the word; his life finds a reinforced equilibrium, like a sur-equilibrium. A kind of reversibility is seen on the ground of irreversibility. Use succeeds abuse, and exchange follows use. A contract can be imagined. (Serres, 1982a: 168)

What kind of contract would this be? Serres’ argument suggests that human relations are intrinsically parasitic, indeed that ‘man is a louse for other men’ (ibid p.5). But can we really construct an adequate account of social ordering on such an abusive and unequal basis?

History

Serres' treatment of time represents a continuous thread running through all of his work (see Assad, 1999). Like Bergson before him, Serres has done much to emphasise that the 'irreversible time' discovered by nineteenth century thermodynamics needs to become a proper object of thought for the social and human sciences. The processes that define living cannot be run backwards to reveal their initial conditions, in the way that that is suggested by 'clock time'. Living is descent, a downward progress from differentiation through a long series of equilibriums that follow the energetic thalweg leading toward indifferentiation and eventual stability: death.

This is not to say that there is a single temporal order that defines our lives. We should instead see experience, and indeed our own bodies, as something like 'exchangers of time' where 'several chronies intertwine' (Serres, 1982a: 72). Our lives are points of exchange where biological and evolutionary pulses of time become enchained with rhythms of social exchange and even ancient, mythic logics. So whilst parasitism, with its strategy of taking without giving, is emblematic of irreversibility, it gives rise to human relations that tend towards other forms of timing.

When the parasite gives information to energy they produce differentiation in a system:

The relation upsets equilibrium, making it deviate. If some equilibrium exists or ever existed somewhere, somehow, the introduction of the parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium. Immediately, the system changes; time has begun (Serres, 1982a: 182)

A closed system at equilibrium knows no time, or rather it knows only the endless, ceaseless time of the return to steady state. Living systems, by contrast, operate quite far from equilibrium states, oscillating between numerous existing and emergent norms. What we call history begins with differentiation, divergence. Serres likens it to an empty set or a white space that is invaded by the parasite, who chases out all the others, creating disequilibrium – 'the introduction of parasite in a system is equivalent to the introduction of noise ... time does not begin without its intervention' (ibid p.184).

Recall the noise at the door that disturbed the city rat and the country rat, who then fled. The system returns to equilibrium, the parasites are chased out, the system is again an empty set. But who made the noise? A further parasite... In this way the parasite both differentiates and de-differentiates. One parasite kicks the system into life, whilst another returns it to its empty or blank state. History stops and starts with this endless invasion and purging of space by parasites.

Fourth definition of the parasite – a living organism that takes without giving as it infects its host

This biological interpretation emphasises that the host may gain some benefit from its exposure to the parasite. Usually hosts can tolerate a parasite because of their relatively small size. Furthermore, on detecting the parasite, the host is able to develop strategies of adaptation:

The parasite gives the host the means to be safe from the parasite. The organism reinforces its resistance and increases its adaptability. It is moved a bit away from its equilibrium and it is then even more strongly at equilibrium. The generous hosts are therefore stronger than the bodies without visits. (Serres, 1982a: 193)

We have mentioned before the phrase cited approvingly by Serres that 'health is the silence of the organs'. This is usually attributed to the noted French surgeon and academician René Leriche, but was developed a greater length by George Canguilhem (1991). Both Leriche and Canguilhem argued that illness and pathology push the organism to adapt by shifting the normative basis of its functioning. Through illness, the organism discovers new modes of normativity. For Serres, the episodes of crisis represented by illness provoke an organic system to settle around 'counternorms'. The parasite hardens the system against further parasitism.

This same logic of norms and counternorms can be shifted to human relations. The meal at the dinner table, or the discussion at the table in Plato's *Symposium*, is disrupted by the uninvited guest, the parasite. The existing guests then work together to expel the parasite, and in so doing become a different form of collective.

Serres' draws here upon Rene Girard's (1978) account of scapegoating. For Girard, the scapegoat is a person who is an 'innocent party who polarizes a universal hatred' (1987: 5). This hatred emerges through a mediated form of emotion that Girard terms 'mimetic desire'. Our desires are fundamentally based on taking those of others as models. Thus, vicariously, what the other wants is what I want. Mimesis gives rise automatically to rivalry, as we come to see the other as an obstacle to the fulfilment of our desires. The solution is to nominate a particular individual – the scapegoat – who will become the collective object of hatred, and whose expulsion or destruction will temporarily resolve the problem of rivalry.

For example, Job in the Old Testament is transformed from his status as 'idol' to 'victim' of his people, when he is threatened with violence and sacrifice (see Girard, 1987). Yet his suffering has a purpose. It safeguards the community by displacing their internal tensions that become reabsorbed in a 'positive religion' that develops around the ritual expulsion. Serres blends Girard's account of scapegoating with parasitism:

History hides the fact that man is the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is a hospitable space. Plants and animals are always his hosts; man is always necessarily their guest. Always taking, never giving. He bends the logic of exchange and of giving in his favour

when he is dealing with nature as a whole. When he is dealing with his kind, he continues to do so; he wants to be the parasite of man as well. And his kind want to be so too. Hence rivalry. (Serres, 1982a: 24)

Since humans are parasites to one another, rivalry must occur, which is solved by sacrifice – the existing guests work together to expel the uninvited guest. Such expulsion helps to adapt social relations to subsequent acts of parasitism and shifts the basis of the community towards new norms. The history of human relations is the history of parasitism, scapegoating and the provocation to adapt to new norms. It is not the ‘war of all against all’ that Hobbes described. It is the war of all against one: the parasite who will become the scapegoat.

Power

The parasite becomes the scapegoat, who is expelled. But this does not end the matter: the parasite always comes back. Job, for example, returns to his people and becomes more celebrated and honoured than he was before his expulsion. This is the ‘return of the repressed’, as Serres puts it. To understand the significance of this return we need to follow Serres’ account of property relations. Property comes from enclosure, from drawing a boundary or partition. The most basic form of this partitioning is found in eating practices:

Whoever was a lodger for a long time, and thus in a group even in the most secret acts where the private is never safe, remembers someone who was not willing to divide the salad course. When the salad bowl came, he spat in it, and the greens were his. The salad was all his; no one argued with him. (Serres, 1982a: 140)

Spitting on the food renders it unclean to others, but not to the one who spits – ‘as soon as you soil it ... it is yours’ (ibid p.144). The origin of property is in this play of dirt and cleanliness. What is ours is always clean to us, however dirty it appears to others. One’s own dung smells good.

Fifth definition of the parasite – the one who is always near to food, close to the meat

The parasite continuously interrupts the meal, seeking ways to make some of it their own, to transform what is common into their own property. Serres sees this transformation as not just pivotal to human relations, but also to knowledge itself. Throughout his work he repeats the story of the origins of geometry in the work of the *harpedonats* who were charged with dividing up the fertile land left in the flood plain of the river Nile (see Serres, 1982 pp.178-180; Serres, 1990). This required the technical invention of methods of measurement to judge disputed boundary lines. The white space is differentiated. Serres see this as akin to the grand foundational gestures made in philosophy. Descartes, for example, creates a white space through his stratagem of doubt, which is then differentiated into Cartesian reason – ‘the Cartesian meditation eliminates, expels, banishes everything, hyperbolically ... and this slate and this spot are the extent to which I am master and possessor of my own thought’ (Serres, 1982a: 180).

The white space does not stay empty for long though. Like a freshly tilled garden, the parasites – the weeds, the rabbits – soon find a way to come back in. What is expelled returns. In fact, exchange itself is a kind of return. When we sell the fruits of our labour, what we gain is what we have expelled in a different form. Serres discusses the bible story of Joseph who was envied and scapegoated by his brothers, who secretly sold him into slavery. The gold pieces are the first of his returns that punctuate the story.

Money is, of course, the universal exchanger, the ultimate instance of Marx's 'general equivalent'. For Serres it is the most abstract form taken by the parasite, a return of the repressed. And if one's own dung is never unclean then 'money doesn't smell. It is mine; it's a little pile of shit; it doesn't smell; it's everyone's. It is mine, yours, yet it is clean and hence exchangeable' (ibid, p.145). The greater the effort exerted to chase away the parasite, to purge the white space, to defend property, the more abstract the parasite becomes. If the parasite logic of 'taking without giving' is what grounds exchange, then money is its ultimate form.

Serres then offers a unique account of power. We have learned from Foucault (1979) to mistrust the idea of 'sovereign power' as centralised. Power is distributed, it infuses social relations in such a way that it acts upon our actions rather than proscribes. Serres takes this account one stage further. Power is part of the game of parasitism. The parasite does not seek to establish property rights, they merely exploit all such efforts at enclosure and create a vector where everything flows towards them. In the chain or cascade of parasites that opens up in every white space, the position of power is always found in she or he who comes last. From this position, one may parasitise all the others. Once again, the only thing the parasite fears is another parasite waiting behind them.

Serres (1982b) refers to this as 'the wolf's game', after a fable by Aesop. A wolf chances upon a lamb drinking from a stream. The wolf accuses the lamb of muddying his water. The lamb replies that they are drinking downstream and could not possibly do so. In reply, the wolf accuses the lamb of having slandered him in the past and drags him off into the woods for slaughter. The game here is to arrive a position 'downstream'. It does not matter how this is done. The wolf makes an unfounded accusation that renders him as the aggrieved party – justice must be done. The king establishes a set of tributes such that a slice of production must always be reserved for him. The trader finds a way to short sell the market.

Power depends less on authority than it does upon the invention of technical means to come downstream, to be in the last position in a parasitic chain. The secret of power is the discovery of the 'wolf's game', of the means to jump to the end of a cascade of parasites:

He who is well-placed has the right to eat the others. It is always a question of a meal, of visitors and of guests. What does the lion give in exchange for his good? Nothing? Not entirely. An edict, a document, a passport, words and writing. He pays for his meal in well-turned, well

written phrases. And thus he is in the position of a parasite, a universal parasite. One day we will have to understand why the strongest is the parasite – that is to say, the weakest – why the one whose only function is to eat is the one who commands. And speaks. We have found the place of politics. (Serres, 1982a: 26)

In order to play this game well, the parasite needs a detailed understanding of space. They need to see points of connection, routes, boundaries, regions that can be transformed – ‘the master is always a geometer, a topologist, and someone who knows space first of all’ (ibid, p.59). If parasitism is a fundamental form taken by power, then topology is its pre-eminent science and the mathematics of fuzzy sets its basic logic.

Society

We have seen how Serres uses the concept of the parasite to rethink some of the foundations of human and social science (communication, exchange, history, power). We are now close to a substantive account of the ordering of social relations. This involves one of Serres’ most interesting and potentially fruitful notions – the mutation of the parasite into a *quasi-object*.

Recall the story of Joseph. Most loved of his brothers, he is cast into the bottom of a well by his jealous rivals, who daub his clothes with blood to convince his father that he is dead. Sold into slavery, his skilful interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams enables him to rise to the position of vizier. He is ultimately reunited with and saves the house of Israel. Joseph is excluded, but returns. He returns first in the form of money, then as vizier, and ultimately as the supporting bough of the Israelites. In this way Joseph seems to circulate between numerous identities and positions:

He is a slave, he is a majordomo; he is a prisoner; he is the bailiff of the jailor; the master of his brothers. Joseph is not fixed in his identity ... For a long time, he is not recognized, his justice is not known; he is both master and slave. (Serres, 1982a: 159)

This circulation between identities has a function. Joseph makes connections, he enables a pathway to be built between forms of order that otherwise could not communicate: Pharaoh with his dreams; the Egyptians with the famine; the House of Israel with its rival brothers. It is the capacity to transform, to become the missing piece that forms the link that gives Joseph his unique trajectory through circumstances. Serres names Joseph as ‘joker’:

[I]t is especially a Judaic invention ... that the one who is sacrificed is substituted, that suddenly the victim is something else: a goat, a kid, but also the beginning of a completely other series. I shall call this object a joker ... This white object, like a white domino, has no value so as to have every value. It has no identity, but its identity, its unique character, its difference, as they say, is to be, indifferently, this or that unit of a given set. The joker is king or jack, ace or seven or deuce ... A is b, c, d, etc. Fuzzy. ... That joker is a logical object that is both indispensable and

fascinating. Placed in the middle or at the end of a series, a series that has a law of order, it permits it to bifurcate, to take on another appearance, another direction, a new order. (Serres, 1982a: 160)

The joker is a card in a game that serves to alter the direction of play. It interrupts the game and makes a new set of moves possible. Likewise, the white or blank domino can change the fortunes of a player because it can be played to link sequences of dominos that are otherwise incommensurable. In a way this special object is both the weakest and strongest in the game. It has no particular value, and hence appears to be extraneous, worthy of being gotten rid of as soon as possible in favour of more valuable tokens. But at the same time it has the capacity to take on all possible values in the game, and at particular moments in the unfolding of the game it can be the most highly prized of all tokens.

The story of Joseph demonstrates that jokers – those who are not fixed in identity and therefore can take on all identities – are indispensable to social order. They are tokens of exchange, and as such are traded, excluded, sacrificed. But they always return, and in so doing transform the social setting such that new connections and pathways are possible – ‘the movement, the hesitation, the vibration, and the double frenzy of inclusion and exclusion constitute the joker in a multiplicity of situations, in a spectrum of possibilities’ (ibid, p.161) The joker is a particular form of parasite that provokes activity within the system. It introduces a change of play, a raising of stakes, a redistribution of fortunes in the game and possible outcomes.

Sixth definition of the parasite – a ‘thermal exciter’, that which catalyses the system to a new equilibrium state

The capacity for social ordering to proceed in different directions is relative to that of the joker:

The ramification of the network depends on the number of jokers. But I suspect there is a limit to this. When there are too many, we are lost as if in a labyrinth. What would a series be if there were only jokers? What could be said of it? (Serres, 1982a: 162)

An ordered series depends on the presence of a joker to enable it to ramify, to make novel connections. Yet it also depends upon the comparative rarity of the joker. There must be clear and differentiated identities amongst the majority of its elements. There is no game when there are only jokers. Similarly, if there were no hosts, only parasites, then life would not be sustainable. For Serres, production or energy must be common, abundant, in order to sustain parasitism. The joker is the special or ‘rare’ element that circulates through the energetic pathways of the system.

Serres compares the movement of the joker to that of a token in a child’s game such as ‘hunt the slipper’ or ‘button, button, who’s got the button?’ In such games, the aim is usually to pass on the token such that one is not holding it when the round of play stops. The players then gain their individual status

through the relationship they have with the token – ‘if he is discovered he is ‘it’. Who is the subject, who is an ‘I’ or who am I? The moving furet [token] weaves the ‘we’, the collective, if it stops, it marks the ‘I’ (ibid, p.225).

A better example is that of a rugby match. Here the players arrange themselves in relation to the passing of the ball, which is the primary object on the pitch – ‘playing is nothing else but making oneself an attribute of the ball as a substance’ (ibid, p.226). The movement of the ball will determine the ‘hero’ who scores, the ‘villain’ who fails to intercept a pass, the ‘hog’ who fails to pass the ball on quickly enough. The subject (from *subjectus* xxx or *subjicere* xxx) is literally she or he who is ‘put beneath’ or ‘subjugated’ to the movement of the ball. This gives the ball-token a curious status. It is certainly an object, but one with the remarkable power to mark out subjects, it is an ‘astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity’ (ibid, p.227). Serres calls such a token a ‘quasi-object’:

This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject, who, without it, would not be a subject ... This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops it makes the individual. (Serres, 1982a: 225)

A quasi-object is a joker-like token whose movement defines a collective. Who are we? Those who pass the ball. Who am I? The one who is marked out by the stopping of the ball. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the collective is the overall set of the set of plays where subjectivity is marked by the ball, by its movement – ‘participation is the passing of the ‘I’ by passing’ (ibid, p.228). To be picked out in this way is a risk. The scapegoat is often the one ‘left holding the ball’ at end of a disastrous play. Once again we see how the collective is strengthened and transformed – how it is ‘excited’ or ‘superheated’ – by the mechanism of exclusion. The quasi-object makes collectivity, selects individuals for exclusion and re-makes the collective in the restarting of the play.

The central proposition that Serres makes here is that social ordering is not a collecting together of individuals, but rather a set of sets of ‘plays’ around the quasi-object. There is no social contract as such, rather a material grounding of social relations with this special object, this joker, this peculiar parasite that is neither properly subject nor object but rather that upon which relationships as such between persons are founded. It is the ‘elementary relation’ (ibid, p.224) on which all relations of collectivity and individuality are to be understood.

The included third

Serres’ concept of the parasite has its place in a broader post-Kantian effort to challenge how we think identity. Serres particular contribution is to demonstrate that the classical logic of the excluded middle is faulty and generates a ‘third man’ position from which identity is distributed. Personifying this ‘third man’ or ‘third space’ as the parasite, Serres explores how thirdness both makes communication possible and interrupts it simultaneously. Echoing the slogan of Deleuze & Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, Serres asserts that ‘things work because they don’t work’. We are only together because of the parasite.

Parasitism becomes, for Serres, the central 'fact' of existence. Without interruption, a system would be locked into an equilibrium state, entirely closed off the rest of the world. It is the inclusion of exteriority into a system, the invasion of the host by the parasite, which acts to 'dope' or 'excite' it. Transformation and change are the outcomes of parasitic operations of analysis (redirection), paralysis (disturbance) and catalysis (transformation).

The parasite is the elementary form of relations. It is the basis of intersubjectivity, of our 'being together'. We must think of social ordering as one instance of a broader work of making and transforming relations through parasitism. Hence to seek a basis for social order in terms of some kind of contract or conflict between individuals is mistaken. Mediation, 'thirdness', is the necessary grounds for the intersubjective, indeed for subjectivity itself. Serres is then able to redescribe many of the fundamental concepts of the human and social sciences – communication, exchange, history, power, society – as outcomes of parasitized relations. Abuse value is the basis of all value. The included third is what allows for the excluded third. Knowledge itself arises from the noise of the parasite.

Returning to our opening example, we can see that it is difficult to disentangle politics from parasitism. The Occupy movement are deemed as 'hypocrites' because they refuse to offer a single political position on economy and society. Yet they are wise to do so. Stations and positions are not sources of power, they are what are parasitized to produce power. She or he who makes a blank space, an enclosure, is simply issuing an invitation to the parasite. Change and transformation comes from disequilibrium, redirecting flows, not stopping and defending them.

The newspaper that hired the thermal cameras was looking for energy, for warmth, for excitement. But it was looking in the wrong direction. It ought to have turned the cameras on its own newsrooms. The 'thermal excitation' was being produced within the neoliberal media itself as it struggled to expel the parasite that Occupy London Stock Exchange represented. They were forced to utilise new technologies, such as thermal imaging, in the efforts to exclude this newly visible 'uninvited guest'.

And what of the London Stock Exchange itself, that pulsating warm body of capital to which the neoliberal media is attached like a bloodsucking tick? Surely this actor, more than any other, properly deserves the title of parasite! This entity has no other purpose than that of identifying ways to interrupt flows of production, redirecting them through taking without giving through the myriad meditational means offered by contemporary financial products and practices (i.e. securitization, short-selling, financial derivatives). This parasite is both higher up the chain – closer to the meat – and also capable of jumping to the end of the parasitic cascade. Boom or crisis, expansion or collapse, it matters not. Contemporary financial markets find a way to stand last in line, open mouthed, feeding.

I have called Serres' work on the parasite a 'dark organizational theory'. By this I do not mean it is a theory of organizations as such, but rather it is a generalised theory of ordering, of mediation and relationships. Moreover, that it describes a complex topology of interruptions and interceptions, a 'parasite logic' that is in operation at the heart of organizing. From this it follows that if we want to produce an adequate account of, say, financial markets, the mass media or protest movement, we have to begin with a materialist description of the distribution and interruption of relations through parasitism. We have to start with a noise that comes from outside.

Afterword: Applying *The Parasite*

The major approach in European social science to have adopted Michel Serres' work is Actor-Network Theory (see Latour, 2005). The concept of the quasi-object is pivotal to understanding the particular way in which 'agency' is distributed in networks (see Callon, 1986; Callon & Law, 1997), and Serres' general approach to translation and mediation underpins the entire approach, particularly in its account of social relations (see Latour, 1993; Callon, 1980).

Sociology and organization theory have tended to engage with Serres through ANT (see Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005). However there have been some efforts to use the notions of joker and quasi-object directly. Hetherington & Lee (2000) offer an account of social relations as forged through 'blank figures', whilst Brown & Middleton (2005) describe how work on a neo-natal intensive care unit is organized through 'virtual objects/subjects'.

Work in social-cultural geography has used Serres' topological approach to good effect. Raffel's (2006) description of person-place relations, for example, and Lezuan's (2011) analysis of the links between social policy and beekeeping, work extensively with the concept of parasitism.

Finally, Brown & Stenner (2009) draw at length upon Serres in their proposal for a 'reflexive foundational' approach to psychology, where the psychological is understood as emerging from the overlapping mediations of the biological, social and the discursive.

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