

The Art of Flight: An Interview

Yann Moulier-Boutang with Stany Grelet

Part One: Exodus

Grelet: Since the introduction of your work *De l'esclavage au salariat* in 1998, you have presented your central idea that, in the history of capitalism, the control of the flight of workers would be the power of the constitution of the salaried worker.

Moulier-Boutang: In the field of orthodox economics, this idea could seem a little scandalous. However, there are a lot of things that, in economics, have been discovered like that. What Keynes really brought to the analysis of economics is to have realized himself that flight in the system and the control of this flight constituted an absolutely decisive part of economic regulation. I think that for the regulation of work in general, it goes the same way: to the fault of inserting oneself within the holes of the system, of interesting oneself with the absenteeisms, the layoffs, the refusal to hire people legitimately, etc., we do not come to understand either how this system puts itself into place or -- and this is what interests me -- how it disarticulates itself, destroys itself partially or metamorphoses into something else. We must never look only to the tip of the iceberg: the institutionalized forms, or the word of the people, the way in which they speak, supposing that, as soon as they aren't saying anything, they aren't acting. On the contrary, it is the interpretation of the silences that interests me: to seize the silences, the refusals, and the flight as something active. In our relatively sophisticated democracies, the idea that conflict is a part of society is habitually admitted. But we treat conflict as a simple sign of something that is amiss: in principle, conflicts would render a service to the system, permitting it to have permanent self-regulation. These are, we say, measures of security. To me, this functionalist vision is false because it is antisubjective. When people refuse something, there is a positivity. This positivity is not only constitutive of the subjects, who often define themselves in a moment of refusal, but it is also terribly efficient toward the system, supporting its evolution. This means that essentially capitalism does not exert itself upon an incomplete material that would more or less resist it. I do not think that our complex models function like exploding pistons, with some that would be the pistons and others who would serve simply as carburetors and energy. I do not think that the energetic model of work is the best: that of the muscle exerted, easy to use and then to throw away, that produces value. Today the creation of riches operates via cooperation, exchange, communication, and it is done to better exhaust these actual resources that capitalism is trying to organize. Thus, this means that we find ourselves facing a much larger field of

resources -- intellectual, practical, subversive. In this, I submit myself falsely to what has become vulgar Marxism, reduced to an ideology of protest, and even of the single subaltern protest. In reality, this system does not manage to move, to give itself rules and to transform itself in the measure that it responds and reacts to acts: discontinuities, events, the inscription of a subject who defines himself precisely by flight. This is a minority principle: those who do not have power are not necessarily exterior to the determination of power; they manage to modify it very profoundly.

It is thus about reading capital in the movements of work, rather than reading work in the interstices of a capital that would define everything (rationality, norms, grand transformations) and would give space only to the contestation of the slave or the functional protest of the salaried worker, which would funnel further into capitalist rationalization. Implicitly, there is the question of freedom. For Marx, capitalism has this particularity, compared to preceding systems, of inscribing freedom in the initial equation, in the structure itself. Therefore I do not think that this is the case: freedom results from liberation, and liberation comes first -- it happens before capitalism. Capitalism as avatar and controller of liberation: this is the general thesis of my book.

Grelet: The other scandal is this continuity that you trace, from the title of your book, between slavery and the salaried worker: the salaried worker would be a ruse of capitalism, not to liberate slaves but to prevent their flight. From which opens a new history of labor struggles: basically, you substitute the slave in flight with the striking worker.

Moulier-Boutang: The worker movement is not indifferent to slavery: after all, the abolition of the salaried worker, conceived as slavery, has figured into the statutes for some years, and has been suppressed only lately. However, Marx treats slavery as one page of the prehistory of capitalism, as a moment in the primitive accumulation of capital, before this absolute origin that he situates in 1789, or at the formation of a working class. Therefore, if we bring up, like Wallerstein or Braudel, the formation of capitalism toward the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, we brutally reintegrate slavery into this history. This transforms our vision of traditional political economy. For example, we can read the construction of labor-value with Ricardo, Marx, and in all of economics as theorization not of free labor, but of slavery. Which economy constructed itself with reference to the reproduction of the worker, calculating labor-value, to the effect that all exchanges come back to an equivalent man-labor, if not the economy of the plantation? In this, and in the absence of financial revenue (as land had no value), all merchandise was expressed in the equivalent of man-sugar or man-coffee, at a worldwide scale. The slave owner and the planter calculated the price of sale of the slave, based on the life cycle of the slave: they knew what they expected of the average duration of work; they calculated the reproduction of slaves, including the expenses of raising them and assuring themselves

property rights on this reproduction, and so forth. This is the only economy that truly realizes its labor-value. In other words, capitalism did not institute right away the free market in labor; it first invented the slave market, the repartition of serfs, the subordination of freedom to property.

The interesting point is that at the moment when political economy begins to think of labor-value, everything begins to fall apart. Haiti, the island that produced half the sugar in the world, initiated a decolonization that lasted two centuries, got rid of the whites, and abolished the slave economy. Between 1791 and 1796, it was done: Toussaint L'Ouverture defeated Napoleon Bonaparte. The plantation economy was undoubtedly efficient; the problem was that it was unstable. If capitalism abandoned slavery as a strategic perspective, it is because its own existence was menaced by the instability of the market that it put into place: if there had not been the Jamaican insurrection of 1833, the English Parliament would never have abolished slavery. The struggles of the slaves in the two centuries of modern slavery are worth ten times more than the struggles of the working class: they were more violent, more virulent, more destabilizing than the worker movement. In the Jamaican insurrection, there were tens of thousands of deaths, like the Commune.

Grelet: By inverting as you do the relationship between capitalism and freedom -- capitalism being a counterattack, a controller of freedom rather than the inverse -- you suggest to the "dominated" that we are made to be in a position that is more joyful and less depressing than the one that the editorials of Ignacio Ramonet reserve for us: to say to oneself that capitalism runs after us is less devastating than saying to oneself that it overcomes us.

Moulier-Boutang: One must fight against the idea that we are facing a massive process about which nothing can be done and that we endure by protesting. Effectively, we are faced with a veritable cliff of domination. But what do people do when they confront that? They take off; they flee. And this flight is active: it is not an insignificant thing. It goes in tandem with the fact that there are minor things that have an extraordinary influence. One of the illusions of democratic transformation is to think that the majority is going to change things. Yet there are sometimes minority movements that introduce ruptures, fractures, lines of flight -- that are also lines of construction.

Elsewhere, I think that there is a great ambiguity about the critique of singular thought and of liberalism. First, there is an underevaluation, typically French, of what was political liberalism. If worldwide liberalism triumphed, up until having the skin of the great communist utopia, it is not because it was more efficient. It is because at the same time it left a place for liberation, it pulled its own substance from the push for liberation. Evidently, it transformed it --

turned it to its own profit, as if from a struggle. On the other hand (and this relates to what I was saying about slavery), to say that capitalism defines itself by the market is a gross error. Capitalism does not tend toward the market; it is a system of regulation to which it calls when it thinks that it is managing things, but that it thanks brutally when this market menaces it. For example, when liberalism has, like today, burdened the system with massive risk, a speculator like Soros converts himself to the Tobin tax, saying that capitalism is going straight into a wall, etc. Capitalism is thus less the market pushed to the extreme than a mechanism of control that, at certain moments, uses the canals of the market.

What annoys me, in the *Le Monde diplomatique* vision of capitalism, is that we forget a kind of shadow fighting; we forget that liberalism sucks out the little bit of strength that it had, when it had some, from struggles for liberation. History works from two sides. Today still, if capitalism can exercise its control only through money, financial flux, etc., it is because it is confronting an enormous internal crisis -- a crisis of legitimation, a crisis of the salaried worker, etc. We cannot reduce that to the description of an infernal machine without provoking the sad passion of giving up or an exasperated protest, without inciting a form of demobilization. Because the stroke of genius of globalization, from the capitalist point of view, is precisely this general demobilization: we do not know anymore to whom we address ourselves. No more bosses to sequester or against whom we can fight (the mechanisms have become invisible; they are in society). That's the rule of the game: capitalism is not going to offer on a platter a Bastille for us to take and cause to fall! It is thus necessary to analyze seriously this invisibility of the relationships of power and domination. But, and even if there are a huge number of things just in the struggle against wild liberalism, one must not leave the market to capitalism, or liberalism, in what carries liberation.

Part Two: Brakes

Grelet: Your histories of flight and of capture may interest some people who are neither economists nor familiar with this Marxist tradition in which you situate yourself: those infected with the HIV-virus dealing with the medical power, gays confronting heterosexual norms, drug users harassed by social workers and the cops, etc., even if those are the struggles that are generated as anticapitalist, that do not enter directly into the field of work. That means that your reflection surpasses the frame of a general labor economy?

Moulier-Boutang: I don't think, first of all, that we can make a general labor economy by stopping at labor, because work is an avatar of the subject. When the subject is limited by labor, it's already a mess. I am going to use the famous example of the master and the slave. In this confrontation, the slave is the incarnation of labor, of strength, faced with a master who seems not to do too much, like a fat cat that sleeps. But what the

master did was to limit the inscription of the subject solely to labor: he is nothing more in front of him than a puppet of a slave, a doll that works. He controls the field, and the odds are already determined. Behind this reduction of the subject to work, there is great fear of the revolt of the slave. That is apparent, for example, in the hunt for maroons with weapons, hunting dogs, and so on. This type of barbaric behavior is not due simply to the perversity of a few masters, but also indicates the fact that the masters had an absolutely colossal fear of the slaves. Some jobs were forbidden slaves, like preparing and distributing medicine, for fear of poisoning. When a slave fled, they were afraid that everyone would do the same. Slaves equaled wealth: when one solicited a banker to borrow money, the loan was measured in heads of slaves. Therefore the heads took off! It is thus necessary, before all, to control the field, evacuate minority desires, so as to have in front of one only some wise puppets who are going to save to buy their freedom or, like today, plea for raises in salary or stock options.

For minorities, it is precisely about breaking with this group of puppets. This rupture supposes first that people determine their objectives, their positions, and their needs, all alone, in autonomy. And so that they arrive at that, it is necessary that they break away, that they retreat among themselves and determine the common ground on which they are going to build something. In terms of the famous integrationist thesis, "French/Immigrants, Same Struggle," I say no. A white French national has his identification papers. The immigrant must acquire his freedom, he must first conquer it. And also for sexual minorities: it is necessary, so that the interaction may be possible, to acquire one's freedom, in terms of himself, his desire, and society. It is impossible for a man, a white, a "national," a heterosexual, one of the majority, to codetermine and coproduce the definition of the content of freedom for women, blacks, Amerindians, foreigners, homosexuals, minorities. True democracy begins with the preamble; after we discuss, we compose our energies and results follow. This principle of composition of the differential forces (we find it admirably expressed in the analyses that Gilles Deleuze did about the concept of the *multitude* that Negri pulled from Spinoza in *The Savage Anomaly*) is the real figure of democracy in terms of the contractualist republican model that supports itself on a dialectical conception, unitary, of the majority and is, finally, repressive. I believe that the discussions about parity, about PaCS, or about the Islamic veil have shown the emergence of a conception of subjects infinitely less lugubrious than the abstraction of the citizen that must self-flagellate, deny himself, in the concrete determination of his affects, of his community, in order to submit himself to the existence of the citizen -- this citizen that is only the opposite of the dependent worker. To the fault of this ethic of diversity, we have the quid pro quo of a gigantic interloping of normalization and assimilation, by the name of which the subject represses himself, accepts

and internalizes the law; the problem is thus that he does not free himself or free the others or the group in which he is. But I believe that we have to go further: the figure of the abstract worker must also know this fecund division. Let's look at the struggles of the unemployed. With Laurent Guilloteau, and with others, we defended the creation of the first unemployment collectives first appearing in 1978-79, meaning a schismatic line given the dominant idea that those unemployed should organize themselves for employment, and under the direction of unions. To celebrate a revenue rather than a job was to disconnect this reference to employment, to extract the struggles of the unemployed from a struggle against unemployment that has not ceased losing for twenty-five years, and that we always claim to put at the center (being a question of the dangerous, that of immigrants, etc.). It is also, in a sense, the lesson of feminism. If feminists did not want to hear men speak in order to determine their objectives, this is because men objected that women, producing neither work nor value in the home, were not exploited but simply oppressed and dominated. Because they were not salaried workers, they were not a part of the working class. Thus: in front of the game of puppets where the subject is stopped from working, all begins with a schism.

Part Three: Circulation

Grelet: To say that "struggles must be autonomous" from the position of an intellectual is strange. As a theoretician of struggles, and of their autonomy, how do you, for example, intervene in the movement of the *sans-papiers* or in that of the unemployed?

Moulier-Boutang: I have participated in the movement of the *sans-papiers* for a long time. Twenty-five years ago we were ultraminorities. The meeting at Montpellier, the strike that had stopped during one or two days work at Citroen following the call of the Movement of Arab Workers, I think that that was truly part of a superminoritarianism. Act Up today is a mass movement! Let's look again at Cargo [2], the struggles of the unemployed workers between 1980 and 1992: these were also minorities, active groups. And then there was a moment when things became a lot more massive: the movement of the *sans-papiers* is from then on happening, impossible to eliminate, anchored in a European history that it is fashioning. From then on, the problem depended on what we did: we can be militant; we can try also to understand. I have lived a few things; by reconstructing them, I have also tried to return to what was completely absurd or mediocre in traditional theses on migratory politics. The two aspects, militantism and theory, are thus indispensable. But that must be natural: a kind of bath in the social, without meditation. What must condition the posture of the intellectual/expert/politically engaged individual, within and against, is not a moral posture but a positive habitus in the sense of a corporal or intuitive ascension, a sixth sociological sense without the pseudoscientific alibi of recoiling.

I think, for example, of May 1968. We participated in

the surge of a stratum of intellectuals and militants unencumbered by this awful complex that characterized the preceding generation vis-a-vis the worker movement, vis-a-vis capitalist society and vis-a-vis the media. Up until then, to be an intellectual, meant to think in isolation, obligatory mediation, etc. But to transform the power and the state, this became: discipline, unity, recognition, etc. -- in other words, the construction of an academic and political micropower. The generation of Bourdieu and those before him had been submitted to this blackmail in an exceptionally strong way, with the great difficulty of navigating between the two. This brought them to define themselves entirely at the interior of the Sartrean-Althusserian polarity: either the independence of the French man of letters, like Sartre, often isolated -- I think of Pierre Vidal-Naquet who constitutes one of the rare solid reference points -- or the Althusserian position, to be in the machine, in the Communist Party or elsewhere; or better, the third way, straight and combining the two: the way of the College de France. Therefore, in 1968, all that found itself brutally discombobulated, in the forms of circulation and conflicts putting again into effect the monopolies of production of ideas or of access to the bad or oppressed part of society and investing all the instruments of existing communication: the universities, mass media, etc. Today, for the generation of the fifteen following years, the same thing has happened with computers and the Web. The first tract that I took, with someone on March 22, was about a roneo in a small apartment in the Latin Quarter; then there were tracts taken a la roneo from the Ecole Normale, from the Billancourt factories: we were then in the era of the tract. Today, I see information of AC communicated via e-mails, on list-serves! There is a use of technology, a way of countercapturing the instruments of capital, that is extremely delightful.

Grelet: This form of circulation -- this "countercapture," as you say -- is it the modern form of the flight of slaves?

Moulier-Boutang: Yes. Great is the power of circulation. For example, there is an ordinance from the prefect of Rio de Janeiro, where the royal family of Portugal had taken refuge from Napoleon, forbidding blacks from wearing the badge that they all had and on which was written "Toussaint L'Ouverture, King of Blacks." Which meant that the Haitian insurrection of which I spoke was known in Latin America, even when Toussaint L'Ouverture had repatriated, was judged for treason, shut up in Besancon (where he died) by Napoleon who, during this time, reestablished slavery. All that was circulating. It was a rebel world, not a world on which slavery endured, like an unquestionable horizon. If not, we would not understand why England, in its divine goodness, decided to abolish the treaty in 1804, and then slavery. Let's not make the same mistake today. Let's not internalize in our heads capitalism, the forces of domination that exist in things -- certainly,

that irritate everyone and by which we measure power, strength, and arrogance -- by saying, "The horizon is there, and there is nothing else." Because if that is the understanding of the relationships of forces, we must not be surprised by the people no longer supporting politics. There is more radical politics in Paul Celan than in the tirades of Brecht.

Grelet: How do we avoid redoing this mistake?

Moulier-Boutang: First, we have to hold onto our relationship to immediacy -- something that we want to do right away, and it's unconditional: all of a sudden, here and now. This is not negotiable when the negotiation means demobilization, treason of things, bad unity, permanent blackmail to civil war, blackmail to the consensus, etc. To hold, also, a nonparanoid relationship to society; a relationship of pleasure, without which it is not possible to construct the existing; a relationship to desire, to the collective, the quotidian, etc. These are things that have not been exhausted by the way in which the Socialist party has reused the slogan, "Change Life." One must come to reconstruct a theory and a practice of social struggles that are at the same time joyous, active, and not illusionist. We can have illusions, but we don't have the right to be illusionist -- and if illusions produce happy, joyous passions, all the better. And then, there is the nonhexagonal aspect: May 1968 is also Berlin, Mexico, the anti-Vietnam War movement, etc. Something rather strong, that is happening today, I believe, at the European level. To affirm, thus, the value of mobility -- not that which consists of firing people: that of people who leave before we upset them too much and who, in fact invent forms of activity, understanding, production, interaction, ten times more promising than this type of order that is not even the art of capitalism.

Grelet: Would this still be "the Left"? What invents itself there, in terms of struggles (the guaranteed revenue, the legalization of drugs, the freedom of circulation, etc.)? Can we call that "the Left" or not?

Moulier-Boutang: I believe not only that this is the Left, but I think that strong divisions are going to appear. First, in terms of looking at productivism and value labor. The Greens have already made a part of the way. Then, in terms of the state. The state assures, certainly, some functions of redistribution. First, one whole part of the Left claims that if the state is attacked, its functions go along with it. Therefore, not at all.

To affirm that we must control the collective and administrative power of the state, like the right to work controls the exorbitant powers of enterprise, does not mean that we want to suppress Social Security, redistribution, etc. There is a cure for de-stateization of the thought to realize, in taking support from both the local territory and from the things that can be made in common between Europeans. It is through these two ends that we must make this point of division. It's an explosive subject. Many object: "Yes, but we cannot abandon the nation like that, that's like the game of the

National Front, etc." Certain people truly believe that: I think of the Chevenementistes, those dangerous republicans that have never known what a democracy is. They live ideologically in a feudal democracy and have a theory of order that is very passe, from the point of view of control, on what liberal capitalism knows itself condemned to do to survive: how to dominate a society agitated by a multitude of brownian movements, of an active molecular and that acts on the molar level, to speak like Felix (Guattari). The chevenementist theory of order thinks that it cannot have any global order if there is local disorder. It is to us to reverse this schema. I believe that there will be a very profound gap: the people who defend the nation, who systematically put the state before all, who are outside control, are not only not of the Left but are clearly reactionary. In the European Union where another politics will be constructed, those who, like Regis Debray, sign manifestoes on the defense of the Republic, of the Nation, no longer have much to do with the Left: they are public dangers.

This interview was conducted by Stany Grelet in May 1999 for the journal Vacarme in Paris. The interview and its themes refer to Moulrier-Boutang's book De l'esclavage au salariat. Economie historique du salariat bride [From slavery to salariat: an economic history of bound labor], PUF (Actuel Marx/Confrontations), 1998.