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Debt Without End

Bernard Hours and Pepita Ould Ahmed

Debt innervates collective life. At all times and in all places, it replaces animal violence and acts as a matrix for human relationships and for social life. It is the forms of debt and the rules applied to it that vary. Yet today, undergoing a crisis—presented as a fatality, despite the fact that its causes are known and understood—humanity apparently has a millstone round its neck. In fact, two millstones, one financial, pertaining to the market, and the other—more recent—ecological: a debt to the environment, the planet. The ecological debt is the price of man's footprint: a rent that is overdue, the outcome of years of ongoing pillage. These two macrodebts, the financial and the ecological, are gigantic—their scale the same as that of the current process of globalization. The difference between the two debts lies first and foremost in the way we think of them. The market debts are totted up according to the logic of individuals competing for access to resources in a world without equality. The debts of States are treated in the same way—as those of imaginary macroindividuals—the State's budget seen simply as that of a huge household, and its expenditure as shopping.

The ecological debt, on the other hand, can only be understood by assuming an interdependence of human beings in a nature that tends to produce solidarity in various forms. The debt that circulates from one generation to another is of the same sort. From casino financial economies emerge people in whose eyes debts are risks to be taken and individual opportunities to seize, as microcredit theory and many young entrepreneurs claim. Without actually being wrong, this is not entirely right: the debt that is counted and accounted for is embedded in a broader debt that circulates: social debt. The flows of this debt can be measured only with different tools. They have to be estimated rather than simply added up: their flux is necessary but also unstoppable. The 21st century would seem to have opted in favor of preservation (of species, including our own) rather than emancipation, the great project of the 20th century. Today the devotees of the sovereign market, calculating our debts and demanding that we pay them, share the world stage—often in raucous conflict—with the priests and prophets of the great religions of transgression that manage the incalculable social debt. The remarkable development of philanthropical theatrics should be seen in

this context. Paradoxically—or at least apparently so—in social networks and digital exchanges, the autonomy, self-expression, and freedom of the individual subject are developing to the extreme. This can give rise to a multitude of questions: for example, for an individual to communicate he or she has to subscribe to networks and generate debts, as communication has a price on a market that is highly competitive. Could all the bad debts—those that destroy—be the result of competition that has run wild?

Today's debt is that to an abstract creditor, the Market: an entity both symbolical and real. As neoliberal doctrine sees it, basing its reading exclusively on consumption, this Market is a- or antisocial. It is a machine that runs a permanent risk of being caught up in the delirium of an accumulation without end and without law, its only limits being those of human life, health (seen as a commodity), and the environment (nature). In these two fields of observation, debt has a promising future, as, in the words of the Senegalese proverb cited by Eveline Baumann and Mouhamedoune Fall, "nothing is free of charge, everything received has to be given back, from a greeting to a gift, as all is debt, that which is received and that which is given back."

Hours Bernard, Ould Ahmed Pepita.

Debt without end : conclusion.

In : Hours Bernard (ed.), Ould Ahmed Pepita (ed.). An anthropological economy of debt. New York : Routledge, 2015, p. 200-201.

(Routledge Studies in Anthropology).

ISBN 978-1-138-88883-8