

Per Aage Brandt

OIKOS, PHYSIS, BIOS. A Note on the Nature of Culture

For Thomas FOS

Oikos, family, property, house, home – the planet Earth is our home, everything we have made or achieved is our property, such as: society; and mankind is our family.

Physis, growth, nature, growing nature – the living world that gives birth and lets plants and animals fill the planet and finally support our own species, whose *oikos* grows and grows. Until it dies. It grows and dies alternatively, and therefore often critically shrinks. Death keeps cutting into the growing.



We need to ask, what is a human society? Beyond the historical variations of our cultures, is there at all something like a Human Society? Do we have to be specific to be entitled to ask the question – this country, that country – or is there a common ground: Human Society?

Oikos exists, it dwells in *physis*. All *oiko*-nomies must exist in a physical *oiko*-logy. The living preys on the living and on the dead. It extracts from nature what it needs for what it does: *eat, build, rule, celebrate*. Food, tools, weapon, adornment. And then it expels its trash; extraction from places and expulsion to places – those are the basic operations. It takes constantly new places to extract from or to expel onto, until all places are marked by extraction (culture) or filled with trash, or both. The living dies if it must extract only from its own waste. Growth is mathematically infinite, but the physical surface of the spherical Earth is finite; so when all places are covered, filled with culture and waste, life is in a critical state.

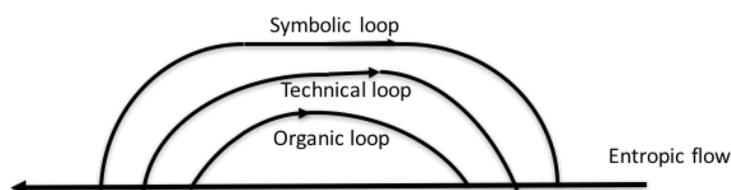
The civilizations of the human species worldwide extract from nature their organic and inorganic means of subsistence. The process forms a loop in the stream of entropy: life reverses the stream in a negentropic movement which finally returns to entropy as waste and death. When a viable equilibrium obtains between food and waste, human communities related by language, habits, and beliefs settle on territories,

produce food, things and ideas, and communication between communities unfold, peacefully or aggressively. This is the primary ecological loop in human civilizations, where it is followed by two more characteristic loops.

Human activity thus furthermore develops these territories into elaborate habitats with urbanized zones specialized in technical construction and production of 'goods' and property. A second loop of extraction and expulsion takes place: building materials, stone, wood, metals (iron), animal and human work force, allowing the emergence of architecture, institutions, workshops, factories, trade, extended markets, roads, shipping. The amount of waste increases correspondingly, and rubbish dumps transform certain peripheral zones into inhabitable sinks and swamps. Urban illnesses and epidemics emerge, as well as urban 'vices', fraud, crime, promiscuity; fields of knowledge and discourse such as medicine, law, and theology unfold. This second ecological loop can be thought of as a level of social structure superimposed on the former. If the first loop and level may be called *organic*, this second loop and level of social structure is, in a large sense, *technical*.

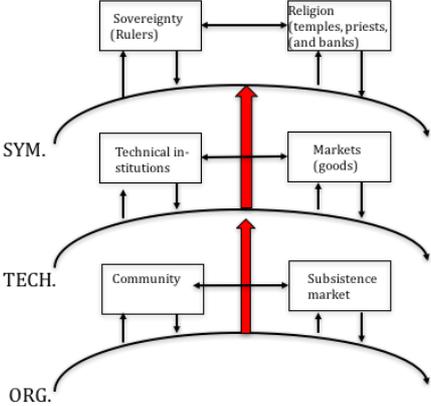
There is, however, universally a third loop of extraction and expulsion, namely a *symbolic* loop and level. Here, it is the extraction of precious stones, metals (gold, silver), and rare and spectacular objects of all kinds that is essential. They are used for adornment of authority: exaltation of rulers and high priests, elaboration of corresponding imagery, and lavish display of transcendent power and sacredness. The cult of weaponry and emblems, symbolic manifestations of sovereignty of all kinds: transgressive, excessive, violent, ecstatic, ritual, religious, and often overtly insane or intoxicated behaviors, belong to this highly spiritual loop – eventually leading to collective emotional effusions and sacrificial celebrations of death and destruction, incl. warfare, constituting a significant part of the waste on this level.

Summary: the three negentropic loops:



This ecological flow-structure principle makes it possible to approach the question of understanding human societies as such. On each level, there are both institutional and

exchange-related fixations (a little State and a little Market). So as a minimum, we get a scaffolding like the following, of what a society in fact has to contain, however its 'mode of production', in the Marxian sense, may be specified:



Bios, qualitative life forms: The most prominent tokens of human civilization established themselves already during the Axial Age, that is, roughly three thousand years ago, with the monetarization of exchanges on all levels, a symbolic means of connecting the public (communitary) and the private (anarchic), the high (spiritual) and the low (material) aspects of social life. *Money emerges*, on the symbolic level, and quickly pervades the underlying structures. It starts in the temples, where the precious metals touch the divinities and magically inherits the protective divine forces. Precious metals, gold, silver, electron (in Egypt, on the pyramids), copper, etc., adorn the images of the transcendental entities, and these can further be melted and shaped into small units, *coins*, each containing divine protection and carry the stamp of an authority. The protective value of money is further 'proved' by the fact that possessing it immediately improves the life of the owner. Temples now become banks: if you have property to mortgage, you can obtain credit and get money to invest; otherwise, you may only obtain money as payment for work. Class society is born: property/no property – the difference becomes categorical and divisive. Economy, in the modern sense, is born. Money becomes capital, of three sorts: *speculative capital*, circulating above the productive society (between rulers, banks, priests, warlords, mafiosi, people above the law); *productive capital*, circulating between institutions, markets, banks, businesses, factories, and workers (Marx's classical capitalist agents), in particular as taxes and profits; and finally, at the bottom, a tiny *organic capital*, flowing between organic agents

(workers, farmers, artisans, merchants, shopkeepers, etc.) in local communities, and flowing upwards, back to the higher-order instances.

Urban states become nation states, as the vertical integration of institutions created by the formal unity of the monetary flow shapes the political blocks we now know as 'countries', equipped with history and 'identity', as they are shaped by their 'currencies', their money. Simultaneously, markets integrate across these national creations and end up covering the planet: globalization of speculative and productive capitals.

The potentially global economy in fact defines modernity. At last, it defines the globe.

II

Here is one of the early versions of the *globus*: Martin Behaim's *Erdapfel* (1492), or 'earth apple'. All later globusses include America, and the model became very popular in the 16th century. (The first models are found in Antiquity).



Societies become 'political', in the sense that discourse and power can now at the same time exist as traditional (organic) power, as bureaucratic power (on the technical level), and as charismatic or despotic power (on the symbolic level). Modern bureaucracies yield to the class-based divisions of the populations and organize the horizontal oppositions of left-wing and right-wing into more or less fragile 'democratic' procedures of vertical representation, focused on legislation, mainly for the techno-political level, and on the style of ruling: despotic or deliberative, or mixed.

Growth is no longer just organic but becomes a techno-productive concept. Capitals on the technical level can only survive if they 'grow' numerically by added profit that can be reinvested. The metaphor of a 'growing capital' makes it sound as if it were

some sort of living biological organism; this is, on may say, the core poetic formula of capitalism. And as one capital 'kills' and 'eats' another capital, the 'life' of capitals gains further likeness to the animal realm. This technical 'organicism', described by Marx in vivid terms, gives rise to a 'spirit' and a discourse that eclipse the underlying ecological, substantial, qualitative views of material life and favor the economical, formal, 'spiritual' and quantitative view of social dynamics and individual or collective values. The new discourse allows representatives to ignore the *substantial* costs of *formally* successful enterprises and to only attend to the monetary perspective. The globalized cynicism of integrated capitalism, interiorized in the populations by changes in language, pedogogy, and forms of moral behavior, eventually leads to the critical physical situation of the planet in which the populations find themselves today. However, ecology finally returns from almost extinct discourses (unfortunately severely damaged by Enlightenment) and finally tend to become a political theme and an explicitly addressed general issue. The planet stinks, huge numbers of living species are disappearing, and economies stop 'growing'.

As long as the technical social structure, the productive level of social life, appears at least locally to work, a certain consensual condition may prevail in modern societies. By contrast, when the techno-productive capital is weakened, something fatal happens, as the agonistic disasters of the 20th century demonstrated: the third level and the first level of capital, monetary and human, *coalesce*. The speculative and the organic start to merge. Rulers, demogogues, bankers, banksters, preacher, sand priests become the leaders and immediate authorities of the masses: the above and the below unite, outside of the ordinary and technical routines of administration. The wealthy agents of the wild, rogue, speculative capital directly address, move, and rule the precarious populations, while disregarding the technocrats and the middle class presumed to be responsible for the institutional and productive decline. The results are the emergence of what we call 'fascist' regimes, with an Italian term that hardly covers the horror of their consequences, historical and actual.

Remember that the meaning of money is: (divine) *protection*. As fear increases, needs, calls, and bids for protection get stronger and louder. Therefore, *money as such* in all forms becomes more attractive: the wealthy leaders promise to protect you, since they are themselves the most protected. The plutocrats posture as saviors of the masses. The insanity of the insanelly wealthy merges with the panic of the masses. The fear of a

raging nature, the fear of migrating strangers, of religious killers, of poverty, misery, and violence, all this creates a call for salvation. But it remains a paradox. Can money and the gods really save the world, which is increasingly being destroyed by money and the gods? (That would deserve to be termed speculative homeopathy).

Law cannot ground the critical response needed, because the level of sovereignty is beyond and above legality, and is immune to legalism, as we learn from historical fascism. Lawyers are already sold to speculative capital and impossible to call back to truthful rationality. Politics collapses and its agents are being absorbed by the big wild money. The only possible ground may be the ethics of what we call *art*.

Art against fear and against the fascist demolition of truth and reason in human communication? That would be my humble suggestion.

Art is modern shamanism: it takes over the fear of everybody, eats the illness and frees the sufferer – while of course carrying itself the burden of the illness. The Christian shaman Jesus was an early performance artist, a half-psychotic magician-storyteller, but after a promising start, his art form was to become insufficient, facing the modern panic.

My reason for the humble suggestion is the following. The use of language in poetry or fiction is based on the exposition of the naked voice of a lover or a narrator. That voice is a force that can be a remedy to the panic, and may even be the only force that eventually can oppose the monetary voices and give truth and reason a chance. Poetry, music and artistic imagery can only deceive by becoming speculative propaganda, but then it loses its inherent force altogether. The ethics of human art is rooted in our bodies, which are earthly, finite, and highly mortal: fragile, grounded in the ecology of our bio-physical reality. Our bodies are not grounded in economy. Economy is monetary disembodiment. Art, the voice of our thinking and feeling natural minds, rejects protection, when protection blocks its reason: it senses, wonders, asks questions, and tries to understand. It does not calculate blindly.

Against the imminent madness of money, we may defend the voice, rhythms, and visions of human minds in real bodies. Those are the expressions of *physis* as we are sinking into its ecological quicksand and watching our own *oikos* becoming a new *stultifera navis*, a ship of fools. An ethics of art may be an ultimate defense, precisely because the effective critical *nonsense* of art is deeper than the insane nonsense of money: the latter can howl, but the former can laugh and think. Those are two different sounds. Monetary logic is pervasive, but so is the laughter in art. If the ship, *le bateau*

ivre, is now the planet Earth, two sorts of fools inhabit it, and their relative strength may decide its course and destiny: the money-drunken and the moon-drunken – the ambiguity may be as uncanny as a painting by Bosch, but it may be inevitable.



Hieronymus Bosch, 1500-1510 (?)
