

Introduction

A Cosmic Thinker

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There are no living without the dead, writes Jean Robert in one of his essays that Samar and I have selected for this issue of *IJIS*. We were prompted to this effort by his life-long partner Sylvia Marcos and aided by the gracious welcome of the editors of *IJIS*, notably Dana Stuchul. In 2018 we curated a sheaf of his essays for this journal. Jean was the senior if silent partner in that effort. For this collection, we celebrate the lifework of Jean Robert, without his guiding hand. We are sad but we are not alone because there are no living without the dead.

To fashion a frame on which to mount his writings is no easy task for a few reasons. First, these are remnants — previously unpublished essays — that don't neatly belong under one subject heading. All who have encountered his foraging mind will not be surprised by the range of topics and references here. Second, though most were complete, some were in various stages of completion. These latter demanded making difficult editorial and publishing decisions. We encountered numerous instances of unwieldy sentences, seemingly oral utterances jotted down, and a fair sprinkling of foreign words in these English texts. Translation is a treason and that is especially so when editing the texts of a man who was comfortable thinking in at least six languages. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the order we present these selected essays reflect our effort to understand Jean's thought. To those who say we pass off what is ours as his, we reply, with Jean, there are no dead without the living.

We present eight essays and one book outline for this collection. The first essay draws on a book he co-authored with Majid Ranehma in 2008 about the *Potency of the Poor (La Puissance des pauvres)*. In the wake of the world-wide financial crisis of 2008-9, they make an impassioned case for what they call “subsistence knowledges.” Economic science, they say, is congenitally incapable of comprehending the distinction between poverty and misery. Poverty remains an ineradicable dimension of the human condition. The combination of low levels of buying goods and services and high levels of self-sufficiency has been the historical norm. In contrast, widespread misery is the historically unprecedented condition of almost total dependence on cash for even basic sustenance combined with the almost total absence of conditions that permit self-sufficiency. Misery is poverty without the means of autonomous subsistence. By that measure, the so-called rich are even more miserable than the poor. Their anxiety and rapaciousness reflect what they secretly know but cannot acknowledge: unlike the poor, the so-called rich could not last a day without their cash. Economic science cannot help conflating the distinction between poverty and misery. It is to prevent the rich and the economist from further immiserating the poor that Jean argues for the return of subsistence knowledges. These are ways of knowing that foster ways of being relatively free from debilitating dependence on the market. There are two broad streams of subsistence knowledges: the one borne of common sense, appropriate to each place, grounded in common experience, and respectful of the human condition as being rooted in necessity. The other stream of subsistence knowledges entails the arduous effort to clear away the accumulated historical debris formed by scientific knowledges that confuses reason, clouds perception, and prevents autonomous action.

Is there thought after economics? asks Jean in the second essay in this series. Following Illich, he argues for three kinds of political limits on the techno-scientific production of goods

and services. Not only a limit on the industrial production of goods to preserve the environment; not only a limit on the professional production of services to make room for communal action; but also a limit on the economic sphere, as such. The destruction of the commons by the expanding economic sphere is enabled by economic science that is necessarily blind to the commons. If we are to escape from our servility to the economic, implies Jean, we must topple the dismal science from its high perch. One cannot escape from scientific ways of knowing unless one is grounded in and by the senses.

In the next two essays, Jean focuses his attention on an utterly familiar aspect of our technological condition — the contrast between auto-mobility and being carried in automobiles — to prove how “subsistence knowledges” can and indeed must be grounded in common experience. Walking and being moved are scientifically described as alternative modes of locomotion. But phenomenologically, these experiences are incomparable. Relying on the work of Bachelard and Merleau-Ponty, Jean underscores the pedestrian condition as one of “immersion and embodiment.” In contrast, mechanized locomotion necessitates the severance of sight from bodily movement. The immobile body in a speeding car-seat “sees” the environment as a moving series of images that flash past. The landscape reduced to a series of moving images is a consequence of “the disembodiment of motion.” That the world is put into motion or at least appears as such to the passenger or driver who is immobile is the paradoxical effect of vehicularization. In fact, the windshield view is a form of seeing just as mediated as the views obtained at the lens of a microscope or telescope. Long training in seeing through such instruments is needed to observe what is supposed to be seen through them. For example, the astronomer must be taught to ignore much of what appears on the telescopic lens to be able to see the star. Jean proposes the phrase “tachyscopic perception” to refer to what is seen when one

is enclosed in objects moving through space at high speed (cars, trains, buses). In the essay on “the stuff of traffic landscapes,” Jean emphasizes the singular optical illusion produced by such a kinetic perspective. The stuffiness of the world, its materiality, its thinginess, is dissolved into a fleeting slideshow of images because the viewer is carnally severed from it.

Transportation science cannot grasp the phenomenological distinction between walking and being carried just as economic science cannot grasp that between poverty and misery. The former is mired in the notion of transport as means of locomotion, itself understood as mere displacement in space. The latter is stuck in the idea of scarcity understood as the problem of allocating insufficient means to satisfy proliferating ends. Both sciences presuppose the means-ends relation which Jean critically dissects in the fifth essay titled, “The Rise and the Death of the Instrumental Paradigm.” The assertion that cars or markets are means to an end presupposes that means are distinct from ends. However, if the car transforms the built landscape in a way that offices are located far away from homes thus necessitating the commute, then it makes little sense to say that “one needs a car to get to the office.” The purported purpose of the car — reaching the office — has been shaped by the car — the supposed means. The empty roads and empty offices of the Covid-19 months have decisively revealed how urban landscapes are built for the car. In situations where means cause the ends, which is to say in situations of tight feedback loops or circular causality, the logic of X as a means for Y is invalid. In fact, when means produce ends, one is condemned to live without ends, as such. Jean names this an infernal condition, with all the theological resonances that word carries.

When cars increase in number and speed, they define the purposes for which they are driven. The result is the topsy-turvy world where ends and means cannot be distinguished. The short essay titled, “Auto-Stop,” which Jean co-authored with Illich, is a quasi-serious proposal to

limit the number of cars. It builds on *Energy and Equity* by Illich in which he argued for limiting the speed of cars. Illich and Robert wrote this radical manifesto well before Uber or Lyft. The core of their proposal is simple: All cars using public roads must be potential taxis and all drivers must be paid for their services. By this one act, they suggested, “a small change in the character of transportation [could] lead to a moral reevaluation of place.” However, the age of Uber is also the age of Tesla and their proposal for “Auto-stop,” like that of speed limits no greater than twenty- five miles an hour, now reads as a cautionary tale.

These six essays occupy the branch of “subsistence knowledges” rooted in common experience, common sense, and grounded in the perception of necessity as inextricable with the human condition. In the remaining essays, Jean explores the second branch of subsistence knowledge which is concerned with studies that clear away the accumulated detritus of engineered perception. Just as black print on a white page aids reading, so also to properly grasp the present requires a contrasting moment. The foreignness of our past serves as a more reliable touchstone than any imagined future in order to evaluate the present. Jean practiced the kind of history that Illich and Foucault did. Since all things that have a beginning can have an end, he sought the beginnings of familiar things to better understand their end. When did the idea of *space* take shape, how was it complicit in the ways cities and freeways were constructed, what ways of being and thinking did it cast into the shadows? By bringing the present into clear relief against the contrast of the past, Jean forces the reader to become uncomfortable with what is taken-for-granted and to thereby begin the journey of becoming another.

The next essay is just such a prod to becoming estranged from the present. A red thread running to many of Jean’s works is the built environment, or better, the modes in which peoples have dwelled. In his reflection on “the idea of a town,” Jean explores the very distinction

between the city and the country; between the urban and the rural, that is both considered obvious and under dissolution today. The expanding slums and shantytowns of the Global South are now increasingly mirrored by the inner cities and *banlieues* of the North. This growing intermingling of city and country undermines the idea that the urban consumes what the rural produces and that the city cultures the country. The ruins of the clear demarcation between urban and rural is hyped in some quarters as the birth pangs of the new networked city built on the communication technologies. According to these futurists, the difference between New York and Iowa is the degree to which they are networked—the relative density in the flow of water, waste, information, supplies, and people. In contrast, Jean reaches back into the distant past—the Neolithic period—to uncover the lived distinction between horticulture and agriculture. It is still a popular notion that agriculture both replaced hunter gatherer economies and produced the surpluses necessary to support the growth of cities. However, Jean insists, there is an intermediate stage of horticulture, of gardening, that began and persisted in urban locales. As recently as in the Paris of Victor Hugo, many cities produced enough food in urban gardens to nourish a third of their population. It is precisely the early networked city—macadamized on the surface and riddled by a sewer system underground—that decisively separates the city from the country and requires the urban to be fed by rural.

Even more upsetting of settled ideas are his essays into the historicity of technology. His considered thoughts on the subject, he told us, are in a book as yet only available in Italian, titled *L'eta dei sistemi nel pensiero dell'ultimo Illich*. Expanding on suggestions by Illich, he argues that the era of the instrument or technology is over, to be replaced by the system. The instrument which also underwrites the means-end paradigm, presupposes a distance or distality between the user and the tool. Anyone can pick up the hammer to deploy the mechanical intention—

hammering —that is captured in it. And anyone can just as easily lay it down. In contrast, once one interacts with a system one cannot put it down. The cell phone, the computer, even the interstate road system are “pseudo-tools” because they demand that you fit into them as a node or sub-system. As such, humans are transformed into systemic interfaces. Proper attention to this phenomenon, asserts Jean, will disclose the gulf between the instrument or tool which one can use and a system in which one is enmeshed. No wonder the dominant ways of dealing with this emerging and fast hardening systemic milieu are “adaptation,” “resilience,” and in general, “going with the flow.” The end of the age of technology also prompts questions about its beginning.

Jean — the architect and historian — tracks the age of technology or the instrument by following changes in the sense of “here” and “there.” In a series of broad strokes, Jean sketches the prehistory of the instrument in the idea of *proportion* and its emergence as *instrumentum separatum* in the idea of the Christian minister who acts as the instrument of God’s will. A *topo-cosmic* understanding of oneself entailed awareness of the relation between place (*topos*) and order of places (*cosmos*). Here and there, like inside and outside, now and then, and up and down express a proportionate relationship within a mutually ordered couplet. All things find their meaning and measure in and by other things to which they are related. The indifferent unidimensional expanse of *space* which replaced the notion of *topocosmos* is itself, Jean suggests, coming to an end. *Space* implies a finite if arbitrarily defined region. One is located in space by some version of the Cartesian coordinates. Here and there are arbitrary points with reference to some equally arbitrary point of origin. The disappearance of the technological milieu is marked by the dissolution of this idea of a container-like space. It is no accident that “location” in the age of computer systems means a collection of bits across databases. Accordingly, the

mutation from the *topocosmos* to *space* and the further break between space and *system-without-a-locus* is one way to mark the birth and death of the instrument. Illich once noted that the Greek etymology of “cosmic” does not refer to the large and unlimited. In contrast, it referred to the bounded and the relational, as for example, the two lines formed by armies facing each other or the two banks of a river. It is a cosmic thinker who insists there are no living without the dead.

We have included two further items in this collection that hint at these arguments. Both also speak to the collaborative nature of Jean’s mode of life and the inextricable welding, in his person, of thinking and living. The first is a long “preparatory note” Jean wrote in preparation for a 2010 seminar in Paris. We include it here not only to reaffirm the broad and synthetic scope of his thought. Above all, it also reveals the generosity of the man. Always thinking in the company of others and always ready to share references and provide criticisms, Jean embodied the manner of a vernacular thinker—not for him the possessiveness over ideas, the ownership of thought, the imagined scarcity of thinking. Instead, as his notes prove, thought is, for Jean, one of the communal exercises in learning to live together well. The last “paper” we include in this collection is a sketch for a project of a bilingual book, in German and English. In it he wanted to explore the transition from “place perceptions to spatial misplaced concreteness” or the destruction of *topocosmic* relations. Yet, he was insistent that nothing is lost forever and that nothing reappears exactly as it once was. He was convinced or at least hoped that such rests or remains of the past that persist in the present could liberate new forms of thinking and being. The project was unfinished at the time of his death. Both these are invitations to the reader to think and write with their author. As Jean Robert implied, *there are no dead without the living*.