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DOING NOTHING WOULD ALREADY BE A LOT

We must act, it is urgent. We must work to counter the destruction of life on our planet. Yet, in many ways, the best thing we can do right now may be to *do nothing.* For the ecological collapse that is taking place is due to the fact that, taken as a whole, humanity is *working too hard*.

Of course, not everyone on earth works as much, nor in the same way. Because of their lifestyles, not everyone does the same amount or the same type of work. It is essential to distinguish between who does what on earth and with what consequences. Different parts of humanity bear different historical responsibilities and these asymmetries must be given justice. However, beyond these important distinctions, the result is the same for all species: human work is stifling life on earth.

*Work***?**

From the point of view of thermodynamics, work is the energy supplied by a force to transform the state of the system undergoing that force. According to the Big Bang theory, the universe is expanding. As it expands, the energy emitted at the time of the initial conflagration is expended, until in a few billion years only inert matter remains. This is called entropy. As living beings, all the work we do is aimed at countering this degenerative movement of the universe towards chaos. Working thus means using a certain amount of energy to create and maintain a definite order that allows us to survive. As such, it is not only human beings who work. Every living organism, tree or amoeba, also spends energy to allow its own survival, and that of its own: it too *works*. It works to reorganize elements of its environment in order to make them useful. The cow spends energy pulling and crushing grass, then digesting it several times in order to be able to extract the nutrients that are essential for life. In doing so, the cow transforms its environment: the grass that is pulled up is no longer present on the ground, the grass that is transformed by the cow's body is thrown away, the ground is trampled, methane is released into the atmosphere, etc. In the same way, when we build a house, we transform a given space so that it can be used as a shelter: we pull up vegetation, we dig and move earth, we bring in materials from elsewhere (themselves the result of another transformation work). In this way we work to shape, establish and maintain a new order in this place that is conducive to us.

The reason we are in an ecological emergency today is that, on the whole, far too much of this thermodynamic work is being done on earth. Now, rather obviously, this excess work happens to be of human origin. The human species has thus transformed the earth to such an extent; it has established a new order on it at such a speed that many of the other living beings on earth can no longer keep up. We have made them *technically unemployed, so to speak;* they can no longer do their own thermodynamic work because of lack of space, lack of resources, or else they themselves have been the object of the transformation brought about by human work.

On many levels, beyond the fact that it is fundamentally unjust, this laying off of other living species is problematic. Even if we set aside the moral aspect of the question and focus only on an anthropocentric point of view, accepting the forced unemployment of billions of thermodynamic

workers as an ethically acceptable collateral effect of our own enterprise of transforming the world, we realize that our survival as a species remains compromised. For our own work of (over)living depends on the work of all those species that we do not hesitate to put out of work. But this is work that we are quite incapable of doing ourselves, or at least without the energy we have to devote to it becoming prohibitive.

The problem of human "overwork" is not only due to the fact that there are many humans on earth. Of course, as with any living species, overpopulation would lead to collapse (unemployment), as resources and space would inevitably run out. One of the characteristics of human work, when compared to the work of other species, is that it has, over the centuries, taken on extremely diverse and complex forms, to the point where the link between energy expenditure and (over)life becomes difficult to trace (for example, do we *really* need a smartphone to live well?).

However, this diversity and complexity can also be reduced to a coherent quantity of thermodynamic work done. Now, as the conditions favourable to life on our planet are threatened by a too important and rapid transformation of the terrestrial environment; as any quantity of thermodynamic work carried out generates a corresponding quantity of transformation of the environment and that, finally, taking up space and consuming the available resources, this transformation prevents other living species from carrying out their own work, it is indeed this quantity of work that we urgently need to reduce.

Until proven otherwise, in the biophysical reality in which we live, there is no free *lunch*. All living species on earth depend on the resources available to them and the conditions that prevail. We are all part of a complex and dynamic system that is subject to entropy and tends to equilibrium. Although all species are integral to the system, from the point of view of the system itself, they are by no means necessary. If, for example, the atmosphere on earth became unbreathable and the temperature much too high, the disappearance of organic life would correspond to nothing more than the re-equilibration of the earth system to new geophysical conditions. In this, the earth is no different from Saturn, the Moon, or Pluto. The fact that it exists in conditions conducive to organic life is only important for the living beings themselves, of which we humans are part in exactly the same way.

So we have to work less. Much less. We must make room for other living beings so that they too can do their share of work, which is not their *duty*, but their *right*, because thermodynamically, to *live is to work*.

Job market

Work occupies a privileged place in our modern Western societies. For many, it represents the contribution that each person makes (or precisely does not make) to society, which gives work an intrinsic value. The fight against unemployment and the ideal of full employment are thus not only economic imperatives, but also a moral aspiration. The very existence of the money we use depends on work. Without productive activity, there is no credit, without credit, there is no money creation. That reproductive work, care, maintenance, education and generally everything that works to maintain social cohesion is, in comparison, paid so little, or not at all, says a lot about our relationship to work and the valuation of its various forms.

As the anthropologist David Graeber points out in his book "Bullshit Jobs", the automation of human work has in no way reduced the amount of work done by humans. On the contrary, every mechanization or robotization of a human task has systematically led to an increase in the amount of final thermodynamic work done. What a person was able to do in a day is done in an hour by the machine. Only, the machine can work 24 hours a day, while the hours of human work that could

have been freed up are generally devoted to even more work (not to mention the fact that every machine itself requires work to be manufactured and maintained...). The notion of "energy slave", developed by Buckminster Fuller, is in this respect very telling to illustrate the ascending exponential curve of thermodynamic work done on earth. The energy slave is a unit of measurement corresponding to the quantity of energy that a healthy adult is able to provide during a given time. Any external energy input (fire, coal, oil, wind energy, etc.), any tool, allows the multiplication of the human work force, and thus, of its power of transformation of the environment. Thus, the total amount of thermodynamic work that we are currently doing on earth through machines would correspond, according to the economist Nate Hagens, to the equivalent of the work of more than 500 billion human beings. This is the figure we need to refer to in order to understand the state of the "thermodynamic job market" on earth and the extent of and reason for the technical unemployment we impose on other species.

Working for a living

In our societies, one has to work to "earn a living", that is, to provide for one's vital needs. As mentioned above, beyond the practical aspect, it is also a matter of values and dignity... But how many of us really work to provide the conditions necessary for our survival? Of all the work we do, how much of it is actually involved in establishing and maintaining an order conducive to human life?

Of course, we do not live only to survive. A "good" life implies for us, as for all other species, much more than mere sustenance and protection (can we say that an animal living in a zoo lives a dignified life?). Our fulfilment, our reason for living, is based on a multitude of other dimensions, social, cultural, spiritual... But isn't the question the same for these dimensions too? How many of us, how many companies, really work to enrich and maintain these essential dimensions of life? Is the vocation of Spa really to give us something to drink? Are the employees of Netflix really working to develop an imagination that allows us to collectively better face the existential doubts and anxieties of our time? Is Zoom really working to preserve our social relationships?

It is clear that in the current economic, political and social system, for the vast majority of people, one's work is essential in order to earn enough money to live on, no matter what kind of work it is. However, as the shutdown of part of the economy by the COVID crisis has made clear, some activities are far more "essential" than others.

What about me?

Our individual responsibility in the face of ecological collapse is often represented as that of responsible consumption. The logic of supply and demand has become so much a part of our lives that our ability to act seems to be concentrated in the choices that our purchasing power gives us: we proclaim ourselves to be *consumers*. However, the overwhelming proportion of time we spend every day working for profit shows that before being consumers, we are all *producers*. We work *before,* or *to,* consume.

So let's put the consumers in brackets for a moment and consider only the "producing" part of our lives. What exactly do we work at? What do we use our energies for when we work? What transformation of the world do we cause by the work we do every day, and in what quantities? Is this transformation necessary? Is it desirable? What is precisely the order we are helping to establish on earth by our efforts at work? And is this order particularly conducive to life?

Let's be realistic: as we conceive it nowadays, work, in its great majority, is simply harmful to life. Wouldn't it be better to say to ourselves, as in the film by Jacques Doillon, Alain Resnais and Jean

Rouch, "L'An Zéro", that "We stop everything" and that "After a total stop, only those services and productions whose lack will prove intolerable will be revived"? Compared to "The Great Reset" (the very serious and influential proposals made by Klaus Schwab and the world elites of the World Economic Forum for a total economic, social, political, technological, psychological *reset* after the COVID health crisis), the resolutions taken by the protagonists of the film seem particularly enlightened, wise and achievable...

As permaculture and traditional knowledge from thousands of years ago show us, what life needs most of all to flourish is to be *allowed to live*. So all we need to do is to do *as little* as possible (which is no mean feat). Why is it then that the heroes of our time still seem to be systematically embodied in the figure of the passionate entrepreneur who no longer counts the hours he works? The question of what we could do as individuals to take effective action against ecological collapse and lay the foundations for a sustainable future haunts us all. Could it be that, for many of us, an answer can be found in a simple letter of resignation?