

**PHILIPPE PIGNARRE & ISABELLE STENGERS
(2011) CAPITALIST SORCERY: BREAKING THE
SPELL. TRANS. & ED. ANDREW GOFFEY.
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The slim spine of *Capitalist Sorcery*, running to approximately 150 pages, belies the ambition of its agenda. A political intervention by writer, publisher and pharmaceutical activist Philippe Pignarre and the protean philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery* puts forth a detailed and thought-provoking pragmatics of resistance, and in the process rebuts the reliance on ‘universals’ proclaimed by thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek (even if these thinkers are nowhere named).¹ The authors are no less indebted to Marx. Their version of pragmatics is in large part carefully teased out of his legacy though the precision of what Pignarre and Stengers outline as an alternative path is bracing. Just to name its signposts indicates the profound difference, starting with Pignarre and Stengers’ first task – how to ‘give thanks’ to the uprising of November, 1999 in Seattle.

Unlike all too many thinkers of Marxist universalism Pignarre and Stengers want to work from the achievements, even victories, of the alter-globalization movement, and looking to America (as earlier the Italian autonomists learned from the Wobblies) borrow a vocabulary that is at once disarming and controversial (and often, they note, awkward to translate into French either linguistically or practically) – *reclaiming, empowerment, yearning, resisting capture, learning to give thanks*. Yet the most frequently used term, in fact the fulcrum of the text, is a more home-grown one from Tobie Nathan’s ethnopsychiatry explorations in Paris – that of the French *prise* the ‘grip’, ‘taking’, ‘capture’, or ‘hold’.² This is both the ‘hold’ or spell the capitalist mode of production has over its subjects or ‘minions’, and the all-important hold or grip one has on understanding, grappling with, and transforming this situation. This hold Pignarre and

Stengers are urgently explicating is of a certain time – this tract was written in the immediate aftermath of Seattle in 2004 and published in France 2005, and so well ahead of the 2008 financial markets meltdown and the widely discussed global warming crisis – though the explosion of ‘Occupy’ movements around the world in 2011 give it the most direct relevance once again.

Pragmatics, as the authors know well, is a key term in managerial literature. In a Google search, be sure to put ‘direct action’ next to ‘empowerment’ or ‘consensus’ they recommend, or you will drown in enumeration of managerial techniques. The bundle of techniques of their pragmatics – one of the most important aspects of *Capitalist Sorcery* is its refusal to privilege *episteme* over *techne*, with all the consequences this entails – has a quite different aim and result. Their description of contemporary capitalism as a ‘system of sorcery without sorcerers (thinking of themselves as such)’, the crux of their analysis, is no metaphor and is ‘not to take an ethnological risk but a pragmatic one’ (40). To propose the situation in such drastic, bold and non-modern terms is to underline our vulnerability. Recognition of this vulnerability is key to Pignarre and Stengers’ literal depiction of our predicament as being bewitched and entrapped by the sorcery of a cunning system of exploitation.³ An assumption that protection against such sorcery already exists is part of the false inheritance and the hubris of modernity.

Marx is a source for both the diagnosis of sorcery – after all, Marx characterized capitalism as a system whereby social relations between people took the ‘fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx, 1975: 83) and described commodity fetishism as a kind of magic in the first volume of *Capital* – and for a false sense of protection given his reliance on the ‘safe ground of “science against appearances”’ (53). This is a more complex failing than the familiar criticism concerning Marx’s alliance with ‘scientism’, since Pignarre and Stengers argue that Marx’s reliance on science was crucial to how he ‘got the measure of the power of capitalist capture’ and this was also an unavoidable reliance in that Marx ‘had no choice: he belonged to a world in which all the resources for thinking that were not organized as part of the combat of truth against illusion had already been destroyed or were in the processes of being destroyed’ (ibid). What matters today, they write, now that we can detect some of the traps within Marx’s solutions, is the strength of his categories, centred around the exploitation of labour and production of surplus value, that ‘well and truly got a hold’ (ibid). This ‘hold’, however, does not depend on a ‘truth’ beyond appearances. On the contrary,

Marx showed that the qualification of labour power and the costs of its reproduction are 'conventions capitalism can make or dismantle' (ibid). If this invocation of science was a 'protection that does not know itself to be such' (54) that therefore becomes dangerous, the description of the 'progressive' nature of capitalism in certain passages in Marx illustrate how in capitalism as a system of sorcery 'the slightest point of agreement with it... is lethal'(55). A criticism of the Marxist tradition would have to be, the authors conclude, that it often lacks the *yearning* of the feminist and black civil rights movements and the protection it affords – 'Not the (reactionary) condemnation of progress, but the unknown of a world where this progress would not authorize any simplification' (ibid).

So while getting a 'hold' on contemporary capitalism may not seem to require an intimate alliance with practices of experimental science, and these may appear to have little to do with techniques of counter-sorcery, this combination is exactly what Pignarre and Stengers propose. Only this sort of pragmatics can allow one to ease out of capitalist sorcery's 'infernal alternatives', that endless procession of lesser evils and false choices that grow out of the reality that 'the very mode of functioning of capitalism kills politics' (25). The clearest of examples of this arise from the recent financial crisis: how extremely narrow alternatives dictated by financial elites and central banks are presented as the voice of economic rationality or reason itself. Pignarre and Stengers, writing before the crisis, use typical examples of globalisation and GM crops to demonstrate how 'the tempo of struggles is decided by the adversary, on a terrain of its choosing' (ibid). GM crops must be *accepted* – or else! The debate over the veil in France is yet another series of infernal alternatives – the veil must be banned or else civil society is doomed. Putting politics into play precisely puts out of operation the 'we have to' that invariably signals the presence of the false 'infernal alternatives'. As the authors note, even direct relations with clients are now often dictated by management companies through software packages that direct the responses made or allowed, leaving no room for manoeuvre by employees. Rather, call centres manage these relations in a complete disconnect from the centres of research and development or manufacture, while programmers expend their time and ingenuity on making these sorts of tools as interchangeable as possible.

Such examples of the complexities of management and organization of 'neoliberal' or new capitalism can be vastly expanded, and they are cited to reinforce the authors' point that such a system can only be

defined quite partially as economic exploitation, that capitalism is rather more the continual manufacture of 'infernal alternatives' that reduce the initiative and intelligence of its populations and replace it with automatic, controllable behaviour. This is no conspiracy by ruling elites, they argue, but of the result of 'patient processes of fabrication at a very small scale, of careful experiments' (28). That such innovations often do not proceed from a central plan make them all the more persuasive in how they impose themselves 'giving the impression that they are natural and make good sense' (ibid). That this is the constitution of contemporary capitalism is why the research of thinkers such as Bruno Latour based in science studies is so appropriate – since capitalism is composed of the multitude of local actors who fabricate it, and hold, support, and maintain these connections. Because 'network' capitalism is made of these connections and fabrications 'every hold is local, it is impossible to sketch out a general picture' (77) – so any kind of resistance must also be local fabrication, an apprenticeship like an experimental science that can only be heterogeneous in its trajectories (76). Despite the nuance and appropriateness of this argument, one cannot help but feel there is some dissonance between Pignarre and Stengers' insistence throughout that their work is part of 'anti-capitalist' struggles while maintaining there can be no 'general picture'. The current global and Eurozone financial crises, after all, can be extrapolated from analyses of class exploitation, yet class as a motor of any of these struggles is prominent through its absence here.

That a decentralised, networked capitalism must be fought on local, networked grounds is not a novel conclusion; that such a system of 'infernal alternatives' composes (without any irony in the designation) sorcery, however, is. To speak of sorcery is a matter of 'naming it in such a way that allows its type of power to be encountered' (30). This implies a very different relation than the 'coming to consciousness' required by older analyses of 'alienation,' or the coming-together of the 'commons' (as in Hardt and Negri). The submission or subjection of people convinced to do freely what they are meant to do, to the point of enslavement, was known as sorcery to 'the most diverse of peoples, except us moderns' (35).

Following the lead of Latour and Nathan in taking sorcery and its composite practices (and energies) as seriously as possible – as no mere metaphor – is to cross over and expose the risk involved. Scientific rationality, or faith in eventual progress, are no longer failsafe guides as the categories of modernity are modified,

reclassified, or fall away. None of our 'scientific' or symbolic/interpretive approaches, the authors note, have succeeded in explaining for example the efficacy and complexity of sorcery. The authors take the profound risk of a diagnosis of sorcery in the belief this is well worth its pragmatic value – 'All thinking about sorcery speaks of the risk of confronting its operations, of the necessity of protecting oneself, because the danger of being captured oneself is always present' (45). This is where and how *learning to give thanks* or *yearning* take their role as rituals, as counter-sorcery. *Yearning*, for instance, 'gives the appropriate tone for this experimentation' being 'something that transforms the soul, not something that defines what the soul has to appropriate' (48). Largely taken from Afro-American spirituality that sings of the Kingdom already present, or immanent in this world, *yearning* serves to protect against both paranoia and depression, the polarities capitalism so frequently offers, while this sense of immanence allies with the ability to create the event capable of passing through such contradictions within capitalism.

Pignarre and Stengers are far from abdicating the qualities of critical mind that some would associate with the advocacy of counter-sorcery, though they are for jettisoning the tradition of critique and 'demystification' based on older models of alienation – 'We have tried to pose the problem, not in the diagnostic mode that separates those upon whom it bears from the person who makes it, but in the mode of a pragmatic diagnosis that is inseparable from the question of adequate means' (106). In fact, the problematic of sorcery is posed in Gilles Deleuze's terms of the 'left' that 'really needs people to think' – 'to discover a problem that the right wants to hide at any price' (Deleuze, 1995: 126-8). This 'resistance to capture' of counter-sorcery thus requires in addition to fabrication and connection, the 'creation of new problems' (100). Implicit in this is a panoply of concerns that involve finding ways of doing politics differently to various traditional strategies of the 'left' that involved mobilisation, denunciation, definitions of the 'true' problem that are made in advance. 'The obligations that give to a situation its power to make think,' they write, 'are not decreed, they are cultivated' (109). The range of these cultivations discussed by Pignarre and Stengers – from open source software to laymen challenging G8 aid agreements, from groups such as *Limiter la casse* and *Auto-Support des usages de drogues (ASUD)* of 'unrepentant users of illegal drugs' (111) to the well-documented activity of ACT-UP in relation to AIDS or researchers' challenges to the pharmaceutical industry – culminates in the 'art (or *craft*) of transformation' (135) practiced

by neo-pagan witches. The witches are an example of *empowerment* and non-violence achieving the ‘successful avoidance of inextricable mixtures of terror and loyalty that such an imperative is able to generate’ (130), that crystallised in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan. The witches are also a prime example of *giving thanks* and *resisting capture* as well as the ‘mutation of a tradition...the rediscovery/reinvention of old resources’ (136) that many thought capitalism had successfully destroyed. The witches are exemplary in that the authors – ‘not witches and...not able to make ourselves the relay of the goddess that the rituals of the witches appeal to’ – can ‘attempt to learn starting from the test that they offer us’ (137). This is a test precisely because it is not a matter of religious faith or ‘belief’ in the goddesses but rather from the experimental and ‘fabricated’ ‘character of their rituals and the undecidability that they confront us with’ (ibid). Problematically, perhaps, the authors invoke the witches’ circle without entering it themselves, sidestepping the controversial move of anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada in her research into witchcraft in the French Bocage countryside, where she becomes part of the rituals she is surveying (1980; 1985; 2009).

The witches’ value here is closely tied to their method, that of the recipe, since the authors argue the matter of transformation, following Deleuze and Guattari, is ‘exclusively one of technique’ (1987: 377). Recipes are not derived from theories that explain why they work; they have to be experimented with, validity has to be found in their results or efficacy. ‘They cannot be borrowed,’ they write, ‘without also being taken up again differently, reinvented, modified, or if one tries another recipe, interrogated so as to learn what it is a good idea to pay attention to’ (133). Recipes, in this guise, are pre-eminently the techniques of *empowerment* and ‘political creation’ (132-3). And rather than being a matter of ‘belief’ ‘[w]hat makes people uncomfortable, what is difficult to accept is that witches are pragmatic, radically pragmatic: truly experimental technicians, experimenting with effects and consequences’ (138). These recipes are a matter of *reclaiming*, of reactivating knowledges that allow for protection and paying attention. To cast a circle and invoke the goddesses ‘is to fabricate a closure, a separation, the space of an experience that is irreducible to individual psychology...of encountering differently what was first necessary to keep outside’ (139). To invoke the goddess is to tap into the powers of immanent change – as Wiccan activist Starhawk maintains, the goddess ‘changes everything she touches, and everything she touches changes’ (Starhawk, 1982: 81). Thus, a ‘freedom of opportunism’ is produced since to ‘do the work of the goddess’ is ‘at one and the

same time to learn to seize the opportunities through which a change can pass and learn to “leave to the goddess” what belongs to no one’ (140).

In *Capitalist Sorcery*, Pignarre and Stengers have provided a kind of manual or field guide of ‘good procedures’ (141) for renewing political action in keeping with the event of Seattle (and since, of 17 September, 2011, of Occupy Wall Street) that follows from Pignarre’s ‘local’ pharmaceutical activism and Stengers’ extensive prior work in the philosophy of science. In so carefully delineating the implications of Latour’s ‘we have never been modern’ given the situation of contemporary capitalism, Pignarre and Stengers also align with the conversation joined by Frédéric Neyrat in thinking how capital, being, God, and surplus value are hopelessly entwined in the kind of monotheistic monoculture that drives the west’s perpetual war economy, and the French collective Tiquun’s writings on the ‘black magic’ or sorcery blinding contemporary *homo economicus* (Latour, 1993; Neyrat, 2005 & 2009; Tiquun, 2010). It offers convincing paths out of the ‘internal alternatives’ that have stemmed from the uncritical widespread acceptance of a disastrous neoliberalism and what Foucault had already limned in his 1978-79 Collège de France lectures as the extreme difficulty of challenging the historicism inherent in such a world view (Foucault, 2008). Pignarre and Stengers offer a practicum rooted in the particulars and tactics of ‘let’s pay attention’ that is ultimately strategic as well as unravelling its consequences in a rich cosmological fashion. Although their articulation of what they owe to the ‘Marxist’ tradition is rich and eloquent without providing a definitive reckoning, such far reaching thinking still offers the possibility of connections and connected struggles (however the result of local ‘apprenticeships’ or local ‘holds’) that was far more common many decades ago but which need to be renewed with all possible speed in the present.

Endnotes

¹ Pignarre and Stengers, for instance, write of ‘the event of a becoming capable of thinking and feeling in a mode that escapes from the generalities that ask for adherence’ (132-3), positing a radically different version of the ‘event’ and how to continue it than that offered by Badiou. This divergence is one that in many respects re-stages that between the ‘universal’ versus ‘specific’ intellectual represented by Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault respectively in

the late 1960's/early '70s (see Sartre, 2008; Foucault, 1980). A large part of Pignarre and Stengers' pragmatics is this attempt to apply to practical creative politics the perspectives of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari.

² For expositions of Nathan's way of working see Nathan 2001; 1993; 1994; Nathan & Stengers, 2004.

³ Similarly the collective Tiquun characterises the 'possession by a *psychic economy*' of one's body, mind, and soul as the only level on which 'the economy is real and concrete.' This shaping of 'Man' into an 'economic creature' without any exaggeration functions as a kind of 'black magic' (see Tiquun, 2010: 83; 2011).

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