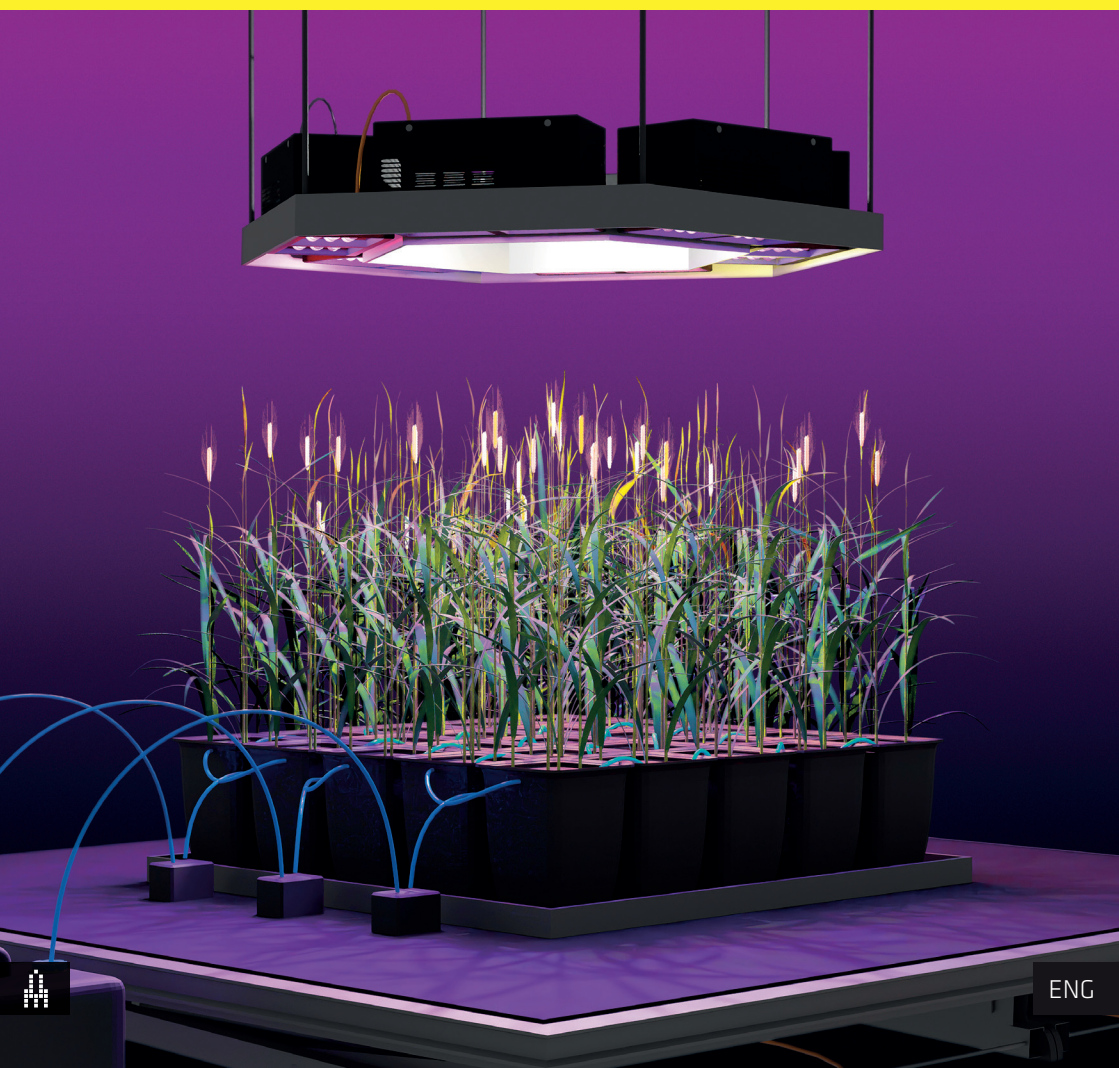


Dušan Kazić interviewed by Clémence Seurat

NO ONE HAS EVER PRODUCED ANYTHING



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As part of the *Post Growth* art-science research project initiated by Disnovation.org, Clémence Seurat spoke with French researcher Dušan Kažić, who invites us to imagine agriculture and a world *without production*, breaking with the paradigm underpinning modern political ideologies.

Kažić is a plant anthropologist and research associate at Pacte research centre in Grenoble, France. He recently published *Quand les plantes n'en font qu'à leur tête. Concevoir un monde sans production ni économie* (La Découverte, 2022), in which he describes the many types of relationships that farmers form with the plants they grow. He draws from extensive fieldwork to present an original study offering a window into little-known agricultural realities.

Anthropology of Plants

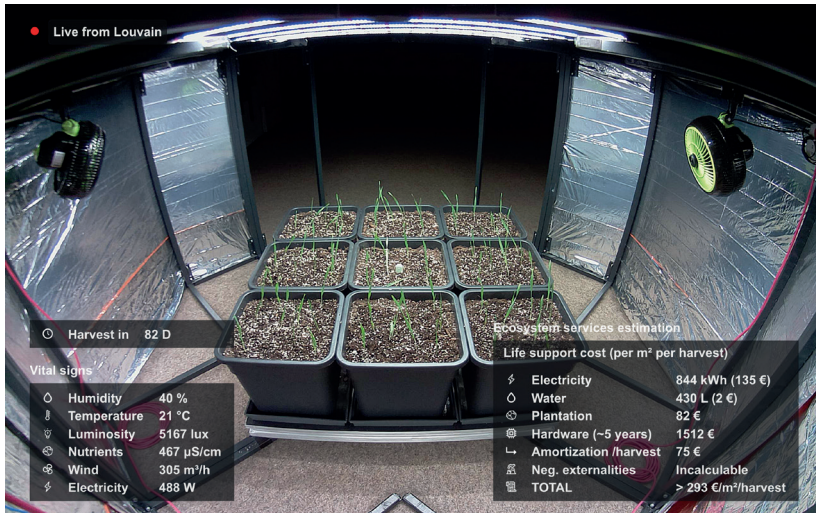
CS: *During your field research, you interviewed farmers who spoke about the wide variety of relationships they maintain with their plants, outside the bounds of utility and production. You describe the different modes of existence¹ exhibited by plants, which are shown to be intelligent, communicative, suffering beings, whereas modern science tends to reduce them to productive beings. How does what you describe lead us to think differently about agriculture?*

DK: When we talk about relationships in our “modern” world, we generally mean relations between humans, or between humans and animals. We assume that there are no relationships between humans and plants, which is why the empirical sciences, sociology and anthropology have been silent on the matter. No one ever mentions the sociology or anthropology of plants. I have purposefully taken the title of plant anthropologist to convey the message that in our world, there are indeed relations between humans and plants. My work sets aside naturalistic epistemology to describe the animated relationships between farmers and their plants. The goal is to break with the paradigm of production – a key concept in economics – in order to conceive of and imagine agriculture without production or the economy.

Plants are often ontologically reduced to an object of production, that is to say an inert, stupid object without agency, whose purpose is to “feed through production”. I aim to free plants from this naturalistic framing by proposing that we no longer consider them as beings to be produced and consumed, i.e. to no longer see them *solely as edible* beings. That enables me to establish other *modes of existence* for plants.

I have been able to show that farmers animate plant life in several different ways. For some, plants are beings of love, beings of companionship, beings

¹ A concept taken from the anthropologist Bruno Latour and the philosopher Étienne Souriau.



DISNOVATION.ORG, *Life Support System* (Ecosystem Services Estimation Experiment, part of the art-science research project *Post Growth*, 2018–ongoing). Still from the Louvain-la-Neuve live stream, 25 October 2021 at 3 p.m.

of intelligence, while for others, plants are beings of domination, of labour, of learning. That enables me to approach agriculture from a radically different angle, not through the paradigm of production but through the paradigm of relation with plants as animated beings. That’s why I talk about an “agricultural turning point” – it’s a major theoretical and political shift.

Today we are witnessing new farming practices in which people are putting their hands back into the soil and recognising other living beings. Although they have yet to envision agriculture without production, as that paradigm is deeply ingrained among Westerners. My argument is this: no farmer has ever produced anything, whether they grow on 100 hectares or 1 hectare. No farmer can reduce their daily labour in the field to a relation of production. That is impossible, because production is an abstract economic concept defined as the transformation of resources through capital and labour. It’s a concept that only exists in economic narratives. I defend the thesis that farmers have never been in a relation of production with plants and animals, but rather in a relation of co-domestication. In concrete terms, this means that

farmers domesticate plants and animals, and, in turn, that plants and animals domesticate farmers. This has gone on since the invention of agriculture.

It's not a matter of good or bad production, or being productivist or not. This false distinction essentialises the relations of production and leads to the mistaken belief that humanity cannot live without production. In reality, no farmer has ever produced anything in the field and no one has ever produced anything at all. The choice is between producing or living with living beings. The difference lies in the quality and intensity of the bonds formed with animals and plants.

Speculative Ethnography

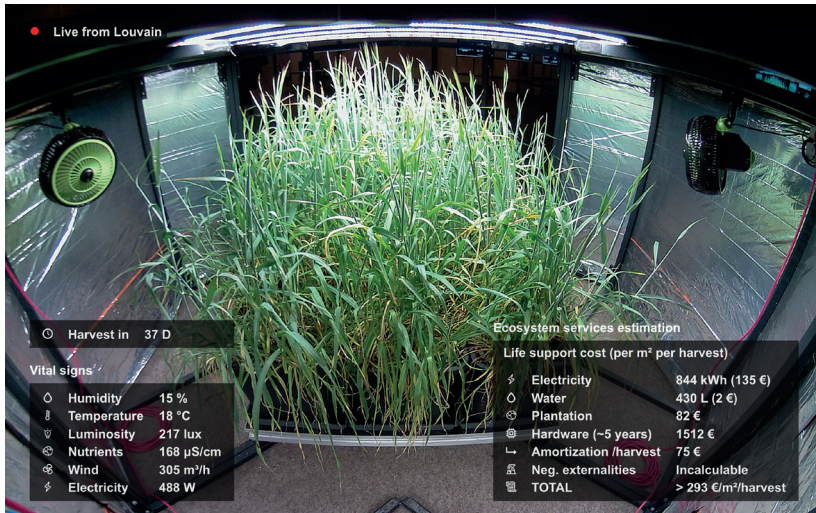
CS: Could you describe your working method and how it offers a serious approach to practices and stories that defy modern categories?

DK: My working method is speculative ethnography, which achieves several aims from a theoretical and epistemological standpoint. The key concept is the *story*.² It's a very important notion that underscores the fact that the sciences also tell stories about the world. In a story, the narrator is situated – a positioning that is the opposite of relativism, which claims to be everywhere but is actually nowhere. Whereas situating oneself signifies that everything is not equivalent.

In my work, I tell stories – I craft realities that incorporate my field of research.³ The aim of speculation, to quote Émilie Hache, is to “keep a door open to possible futures other than those which are currently presented

2 A concept taken from the US philosopher Donna Haraway, who herself took it from feminist science-fiction writer Ursula Le Guin.

3 Following on from the speculative thinking of Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Vinciane Despret, Sophie Houdart and Émilie Hache.



Live stream from Louvain-la-Neuve, 14 December 2021 at 3 a.m.

to us as inevitabilities which we must all come to accept.”⁴ One very good illustration of this idea is the concept of production, which is presented as the only future possible for humanity and that, whatever happens, humans must produce to eat and the forward march of humanity must continue. So I endeavour to describe relationships between farmers and plants, while also speculating, to craft new realities in this world and impart readers with the feeling that it truly is possible to imagine worlds without production.

That entails seeking to tell *interesting stories*. This is where writing, style, narration and framing are fundamental – style counts just as much as substance. When I’m doing fieldwork, I mainly look for interesting stories that I can make more interesting through speculative ethnography. During my thesis, I stayed for a week with Frédéric Chaize, a farmer who lives near Roanne in central France. He has a two-hectare plot of organic crops. I was starting to get discouraged because my notebook wasn’t filling up – I really couldn’t think of anything interesting to jot down. We were constantly

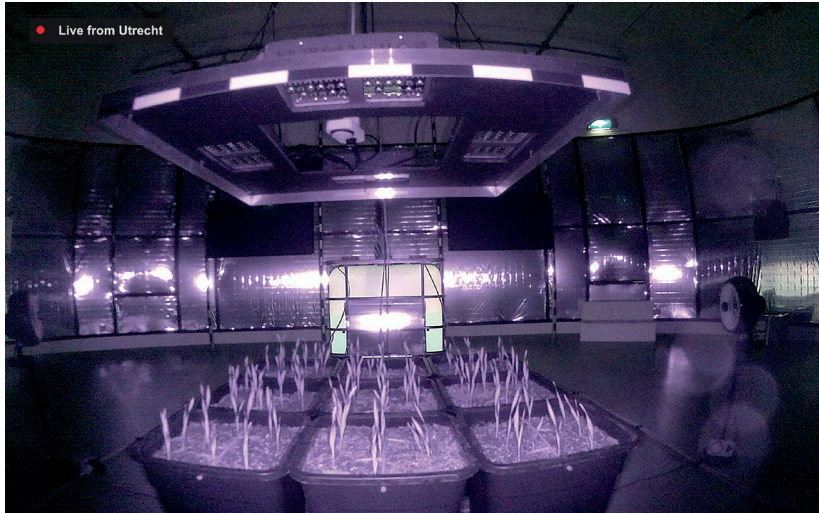
4 Hache, É. (2015). The futures men don't see. In Debaise, D., Stengers, I. (Eds.), *Gestes spéculatifs*. Les Presses du réel.

interrupted by the slugs invading his field. They were everywhere: in the greenhouses, under all the plants. They were eating and destroying everything. I felt like I was in a horror film. But it was out of the question to kill them, as an industrial farmer would have done, because Frédéric Chaize believed that they had the right to live and eat in his field. So we spent hours and hours picking slugs off the plants. And they would invariably come back. It was enough to drive you crazy. Then, one morning I saw Frédéric Chaize a few metres away from me with a slug in his hand. I asked him what he was doing and he replied that the slug's trail of slime was soothing his chapped skin. I immediately grasped the exceptional aspect of this scene, which had the makings of a powerful story about the caring relationship between Frédéric Chaize and the slugs. Then he told me that he had discovered the remedy by observing the plants whose leaves had scarred from the slime deposited by the slugs that had eaten them. If we build a story and speculate a bit, we can say the plants taught Frédéric Chaize that the slime could soothe his hands. We enter a new reality in which the plants are not beings of production but beings of learning. It's a story of multi-specific learning.

The Work of Plants

CS: Dries Delanote, a farmer who you met during your research, describes the same paradigm shift that you propose: "In intensive and industrial organic farming, the plant is not allowed to work. It's given more and more and more food. It's like with a child – if you feed them without making them work... well, they end up getting fat. The same goes for plants. They're not given the chance to capture energy, do real photosynthesis and put down roots. Plants aren't robots! You have to let them work." Could you expand on this concept of the "work of plants"?

DK: That excerpt shows the potential to tell completely new stories. From a methodological standpoint, the first thing to do when you hear unusual stories is to avoid interpreting what is said as representations, metaphors, symbols, or



Live stream from Utrecht, 6 March 2022 at 4 a.m.

speaking styles, and forego labelling such accounts as anthropomorphic. Such interpretations are precisely what prevents you from creating new realities. Instead, you have to understand what people say literally. When you take Dries Delanote's statement seriously – and he's not the first or the only one to say that plants work – that changes everything. Why? Saying that plants work is an ontological issue. Sociologists, in particular sociologists of work, are the heirs to the conception of work as an exclusively human prerogative. And in that view, work is obviously governed by a relation of production. What happens when farmers say that plants and animals work? They radically undermine the naturalistic ontology which asserts that only humans work. By taking their remarks into consideration, I show that we are confronted with an ontological conflict between farmers and sociologists of work, in which the latter are not willing to admit that living beings *other than humans* can work. Taking this point seriously requires a complete rethinking of the question of work. It's a very inventive perspective that is much more radical and original than criticising the destruction of the job market by capitalism or neoliberalism. When you put forward that sort of argument, you actually share the same ontological conception of work as those whom you criticise,

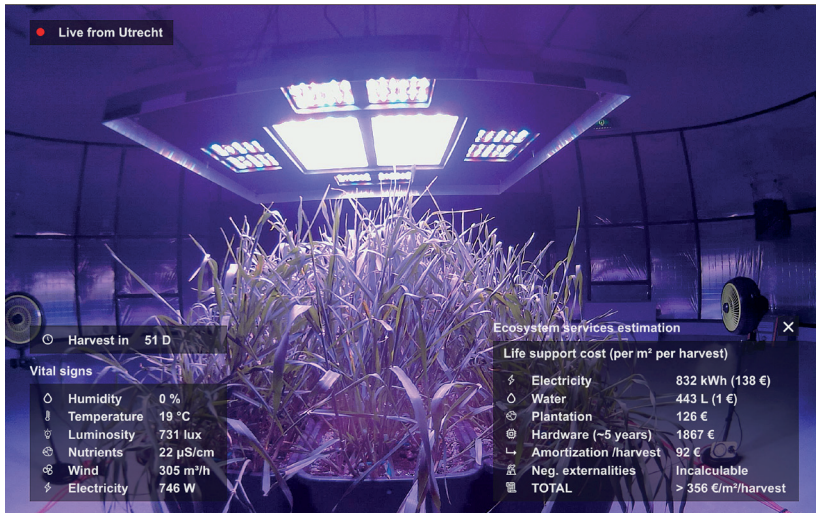
which means that you don't budge the epistemology an iota, while the farmers make a gigantic leap.

Through speculative ethnography, I proposed considering plants as "seasonal workers" to do justice to the work that they carry out in the fields. The idea was to undermine naturalistic ontology and epistemology in my own way before imagining a post-production world. The concept aims to outline a new type of relation with crops. It's also the reason why I came up with the notion of "inter-species work", which merits being fleshed out and expanded, for example by studying plants' working conditions from one field to the next.

A World without Production

CS: In an article published in AOC,⁵ you write that "capitalists ontologically strip living beings until they are reduced to 'resources', which they then transform into 'products' and 'commodities'". What perspective do you propose to counter this idea of resources, which deanimates living beings? How do we move away from a world structured around production?

DK: That article proposes a break with the past world in which production forms the basis of the two modern political regimes, capitalism and socialism, which are only conflicting on the surface. In reality, they share a common epistemology which holds that we must produce to feed humanity. In that view, production forms our materiality. But the true materiality of our world lies in relations between humans and *other-than-humans*. In writing that "capitalists do not seize the means of production to create wealth through private property – the commonly accepted definition of capitalism – rather, capitalists, aided by private property and the concept of production, reduce their relationship with the world to create wealth", I argue the exact opposite of what Karl Marx thought. In my eyes, critical theory is sadly mistaken in



Live stream from Utrecht, 2 April 2022 at 7 p.m.

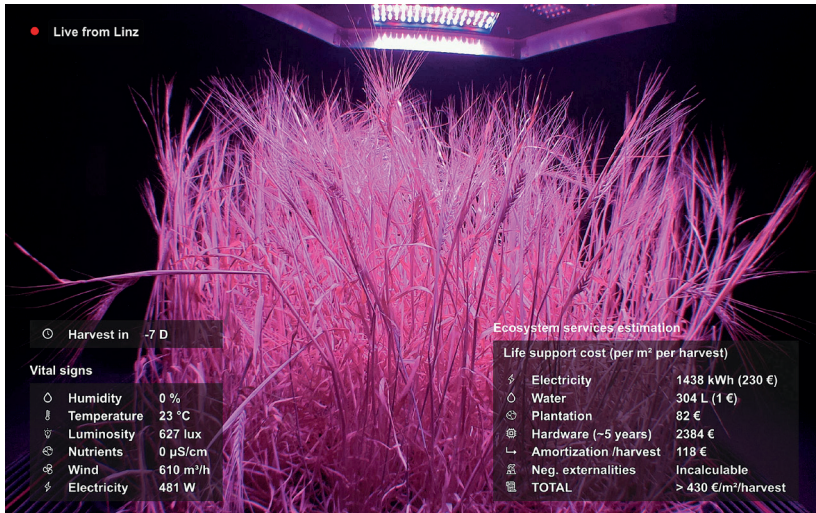
its analysis of capitalism, in thinking that capitalists produce commodities. That's not the case! Capitalists manufacture lots of animated things with which people engage in different types of relationships. For example, if you tell my two sons, who are six and eleven, that the tablet they use to watch cartoons is a product or commodity, they will tell you that you're nutty. The economists deanimate all these animated things with which we are connected by renaming them products or commodities. The same reasoning holds for the living world: through the concept of production, the economists deanimate living beings to make them into a resource. They practice a *policy of deanimating the other-than-human world*. I propose animating plants to counter this policy because we cannot engage in a sense-based relationship with resources or commodities. So that is one solution to the question on how to move away from production: by animating living beings to maintain relationships with them and to live with them.

De-economising the World

CS: Post Growth *identifies growth as the intersection of current crises – political, ecological and existential – that are making our world unliveable and our ways of being in the world untenable. We see the consequences every day. You go a step further in that critique by pinpointing production, and economics more broadly, as the problem preventing us from conceptualising our coexistence with living beings. The “economic disciplines”, as Bruno Latour chose to rechristen the economic “sciences”, present a considerable paradox: they overlooked the materiality of the world in their reasoning yet consider nature as stock. How do we break free from this economic paradigm?*

DK: You talk about post-growth, and I talk about post-production, a term I’m fond of. We live in an era of seeking ways of living with plants instead of producing to live. The term “post-production” refers to a new type of materialism that does not forget about other living beings, or rather, it attempts to form a connection with them by showing the issues that arise when we live with them.

The first thing to do, which is so simple yet so difficult, is to stop believing what the economists say. It doesn’t matter whether they’re neoliberal or Marxist, right-wing or left-wing – they all agree on the fact that we need to produce to feed humanity. Become an economic agnostic is crucial to imagining worlds without production, connected with other living beings. I would say here that growth is not the problem because it’s only a unit of measurement that cannot exist without the concept of production. I think the true problem is that the world is viewed through the lens of production; as our supposed materiality, it takes precedence over our relations with living beings and severs us from the *other-than-human* world. Economics convinces us that we cannot live without production. So we produce and will continue producing until there is nothing left to produce. And in the end, we will understand that we should have lived with living beings. I obviously hope I’m mistaken. We’re in the midst of a tragedy, caught in an *infernal*



Live stream from Linz, 10 December 2021 at 10 a.m.

alternative between production and protecting the environment, instead of *living with it*.

Production is a concept that emerged in the 18th century with the physiocrats, who were called economists. They posited that the goal of agriculture was to produce for the wealth of nations, and that the other mercantile and industrial sectors were sterile. Before their time, farmers had never heard the word “production” and lived with living beings, plants, the land and their daily problems. What did the liberals and Marxists do next? Instead of critiquing the concept of production, they expanded it across society on the grounds that commerce and industry were also productive sectors. That is why we now say that agriculture produces, industry produces, scientists produce, humans produce, plants produce – everyone produces! By an irony of history, the liberals weren’t the ones who naturalised the concept of production; it was Karl Marx with historical materialism, which analyses the socially determined modes of production even though no one has ever produced anything. He posited, like the physiocrats, that all humans produce to satisfy their dietary needs, even though humans, like other species, somehow manage to live

with the *other-than-human* world. Karl Marx has left us ungrounded. When I see all the people on the left who hold him up as a crucial author for thinking about the future of the world, I laugh and I cry at the same time, because for me he is the person most responsible for our failure to move forward and imagine new worlds. Karl Marx tricked the entire left, because all that it can hope for now is to destroy capitalism one day, to seize the means of production and usher in socialism. The left is caught in its own trap, stuck in a critical perspective rather than an imaginative one for changing the world. And it believes, like the right, that the economy and production are what sustain us, and not *other-than-humans*. It's truly a tragedy.

The World After

CS: The global shutdown caused by the Covid-19 crisis appears to illustrate your point: production was stopped for months, at a standstill, but life soldiered on. Yet the economy continues to dominate the discourse and government actions during the current health crisis, with life and health balanced against the economy and growth. The state has intervened as a super-manager-administrator to save the economy but not the workers; life and society even less so. It has assumed the role of minion⁶ to the capitalist economic machine. Do you see paths forward that could make this period the start of something new, rather than an anomaly, for example through the post-production that you advocate?

DK: The economy continues to dominate the discourse of our political leaders because they believe we cannot live without it. Yet there is no reason to believe so – that would be like saying that we cannot live without anthropology or philosophy. What's happening today is that we constantly confuse *Economics*, the discipline invented in the 18th century – which I write with an upper-case E – with the *sphere of the economy* – which I write with a lower-case e –

6 Pignarre, P. and Stengers, I. (2011). *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* (Andrew Goffey, Trans.). Palgrave Macmillan.



Live stream from Linz, 10 December 2021 at 11 a.m.

meaning this fictional, autonomous space that is supposed to be everywhere and nowhere simultaneously alongside the political and scientific spheres. Neoliberal and progressive economics on the political left and right all agree on its existence, and cannot imagine – even in their dreams! – a world without the economy. But there is no reason to believe in this purely fictional sphere.

I have a little mental exercise for you: when someone starts talking to you about economics as a fundamental activity, replace “economics” with “anthropology”. That reveals how nonsensical the argument is. Unfortunately, we have been “economised” for over two centuries; we have been made to believe that the economy takes precedence over all the rest. To move away from economics, we really have no choice but to redescribe the world anew, in connection with the *other-than-human* world, by no longer believing economic narratives. In reality, *nothing in the world is economic*.

I sincerely believe that the social sciences have a fundamental role to play in getting us out of this. The problem is that, as Isabelle Stengers reminds us, the social sciences are disconnected from invention and relate to the world in

a way that is more critical than explicative or experimental. The vast majority of social science does not relate to the world creatively, preventing it from imagining the world of the future. I contend that it is better to speculate and animate than to criticise capitalism and productivism. Criticism reinforces the dominant realities. If you criticise capitalism, you reinforce its existence. If you criticise productivism, you believe that the relation of production constitutes our materiality. To move away from economics, which should instead create new realities that tell stories. I would even say that we need to enter into a reality struggle. There is no point in criticising production if we do not follow that up with new realities that demonstrate we can do without it. If the social sciences shifted toward an inventive, imaginative outlook, and miraculously became agnostic in terms of economics, then yes, I think there's hope.



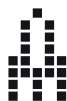
pp. 19-21 : Harvesting a square metre of barley, performance, Ars Electronica Center, Linz (AT), 2021





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