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Patrick Pharo

**The capitalism as an addictive process.”**

Workshop : « Refraining the EU II : Relationships matter : EU policy-making borne from relational political agents », session « Philosophical foundations of Microeconomics ». Brussels, CCAB-3C, 5 of December, 2018.

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Introduction

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I will discuss three points in this paper : first, I will explain what I mean by the addictive drift of current capitalism. Secondly, I will sketch the genesis of this trend through the hyper-rationalization of the capitalist form of life, which was stimulated by the conservative turn of economic policies since the eighties. And thirdly I will try to clarify the distinction between individual and collective addiction.

1) The addictive drift of capitalism

Researchers in the field of addiction have pointed for a long time to the addictive character of contemporary societies with, on the one hand, a race for performance that pushes subjects to try to outdo themselves in their work and, on the other, a culture of pleasures and intensities which drives them to consume more and more on the markets. Indeed, the massive and manifold character of the individual addictions to drugs, but also gambling, games, shopping, work, screens, food, sex... in the Western countries since the middle of the 20th century has no equivalent in other cultures or older societies. Hence we can assume that the rational stimulation of the intimate desire by capitalist firms brought about a context very favorable to the multiplication of addictions.

The hypothesis on the current capitalism as an addictive process is an extension of this observation, based on the idea of a collective drift of the production, marketing and consumption modes of the same order as that observed in the individual addictions, causing in society many diffuse symptoms of wanting, craving, withdrawal, tolerance, and continuing problematic practices despite their negative consequences. In the same way as drugs, the relentless new offers inherent in capitalism continuously act on the neurological circuits of pleasure and reward in order to increase desires and arouse new ones.

However, this addictive trend of capitalism does not only concern the ways of consumption targeted by the classic critics of the "consumer society", it also concerns the ways of producing, trading, monitoring, making money..., which imply insatiability and a loss of control similar to what can be observed in the use of drugs. This unbridled trend could be illustrated by the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008, mainly caused by the cynical and intensive speculations on credit default swaps for toxic mortgage bonds and, even more obviously, by the intensive use of hydrocarbons and pesticides which continues despite their ecological and health consequences.

I gave in my book : *Le capitalisme addictif* (PUF, 2018) many concrete illustrations of these addictive trends observed through the glasses of contemporary cinema, that displays the manifold figures of a deep social critics widespread in the society. For example about the management of human resources in industrial and commercial companies organizing ruthless concurrences between employees (see for instance the Dardenne brothers' *Two Days, One Night),* or the frenzy of traders on financial markets (see for instance *Margin call* or *The Wolf of Wall Street).* I also referred to the recent synthetic opioid crisis in the United States, which caused nearly 200,000 overdose deaths and resulted originally from the intensive lobbying by pharmaceutical companies for the health administration to spread more widely oxycontin and other painkillers.

Here I'd like to mention two other examples that seem very significant about the uncontrollable tendency to pass the limits of specialized agents using sophisticated digitalized technics, in order to get professional rewards on which they intensively focus and by which they are sometimes obsessed. The first one is the recent affair of tax evasion and, in some cases, of actual fraud in Germany and other European countries, linked to the tax optimization method that is called « dividend arbitrage ». That one consists in selling stock shares just before the date of taxation for buying them back just afterwards with a substantial profit. Dividend arbitrage is widely tolerated in European States, because it makes attractive the domestic financial places. But the so-named « cum-ex », which is a swindling extension consisting in getting several refunds from the tax administration thanks to quick exchanges of stock shares between countries, is clearly prohibited and currently prosecuted in several countries.

The other example is the next generalization in China of the « Social Credit System », which aims to manage the social rewards and punishments of citizens according to their alleged trustworthiness - close to an episode of the *Black mirror* series entitled *Nosedive.* According to the authorities, a new « culture of sincerity » would be encouraged thanks to this big data system based on the numerous ratings of the personal behaviors in the different settings of social life. In addition to possible addictive trends at the system's designers, the Social Credit System is by itself a device of « meta-addiction », so to say, since it pushes the citizens to crave and want more and more the rewards promised by the system. The most disturbing is that this type of people monitoring is probably not limited to China, as evidenced by the growing use of big data algorithms in targeted advertising or predictive police, as well as in many other areas of ordinary activities.

2) How the capitalism has become addictive

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The modern capitalist enterprise has always been described from a logic of unlimited accumulation of money and wealth, whether by Benjamin Franklin, the founding father of American capitalism, or by Friedrich Engels when he reported the race for the unbridled and ruthless profit of the English manufacturers in Manchester. Engels himself originated from a family of German Puritan entrepreneurs who perfectly exemplified the Protestant ethic described by Max Weber, for whom the search for money for money was an end in itself, because extreme economic efficiency could be a sign of divine election. Therefore, the gain did not need to be used for pleasure or happiness.

Moreover, the race for money and profit has, by itself, an addictive potentiality of which we already found the premises in the Aristotelian distinction between the "natural" chrematistics which aims to satisfy the needs of the community and the "commercial" chrematistics, which aims at the unlimited accumulation of wealth and money. Indeed, gambling is the only addiction without substance officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, simply because the combination of the loss and gain has a huge power of motivation and attachment to the game practice. That's why becoming rich and powerful is probably one the most exciting and potentially addictive activity.

What has changed in contemporary capitalism is, first of all, the relationship with pleasures of the economic elites, which has nothing to do with asceticism of Protestant puritanism, as evidenced by an abundant literature on the "race to luxury", the "triumph of greed" or the recurring tendencies to the corruption of elites circulating between private affairs and the service of the state. There is also a large production of films and series that show the bad habits associated with the extreme enjoyment of wealth and power, in the private life, as in the films on the rich Californian classes, the political life, as in series on the White House, or the financial activity, illustrated by this new kind of movie that could be called the « film of trader ». This evolution can be viewed as a paradoxal side-effect of the liberalization of habits and morals following from the sixties movements, although the purposes of these movements have never been to remove moral inhibitions of economic elites.

But what made the capitalist development actually addictive is the extension of the process of rationalization, which, according to Max Weber, was the distinctive sign of capitalist modernity, to the colonization of intimate affairs, specially thanks to the new technologies of communication and data recording. What Weber called the « methodic rationalization of the conduct of life », which concerned only the entrepreneurs, has become, so to say, a methodic rationalization of the conduct of intimate life of any person in the society by the productive and commercial organizations. But the goal was not, as it is sometimes said, to make more rational love or to rationalize basic attachments that have finally changed little in contemporary individuals. It was rather to inscribe at the heart of the desire of the modern subject what the capitalist enterprise knows how to offer him in a methodical and concerted manner, as for example perspectives of career, gain and success, popular systems of tastes and preferences, networks of partners or "friends" on the Internet, or means of evaluating and rating all that can be sold and purchased, including dating.

According to recurrent testimonies of former employees of the most powerful groups such as Facebook or Amazon, the techniques of creation of craving and addictions for commercial purposes have now become part of the arsenal of these firms. These streamlining devices are focused on the technology of markets extension, which has become a hyper-rational machine for exploration and mobilization of desire, with namely increasingly intrusive marketing and consumer hooking technics. They also apply to work and human resources management, with the added threat of job loss that makes it even more necessary for employees to be totally involved in their work. In both cases, the rewards associated with the most addictive practices are irrelevant to their intrinsic value, in the same way that drugs « hijack », as is said in evolutionary psychology, motivational devices that have appeared in the ancestral environment to foster parental or sexual attachment.

Over the last forty years, this trend has known an unprecedented acceleration thanks to the use of digital tools in all human activities, which favored the acceleration of financial transactions through virtual exchanges, the extreme optimization of the production of goods and services, the systematic elimination of sources of deficit in the business, the generalization of competition between employees and departments, the widening of the sources of trade, the individualization of market targets, the compulsive use of technologies of enrolling and monitoring, in addition to the over-use of natural resources whose ecological and human consequences are increasingly unmanageable. Thus, the Weberian process of rationalization of economic activities has become a process of hyper-rationalization, whose effects on the practical life of many people contradict the expected rewards, what is one of the hallmarks of an addictive process.

Last but not least, the addictive drift of capitalism was strongly stimulated and amplified by the general ebb or abandonment, including in the Social Democratic parties, of this "portion of communism" which founded the consensus of European societies after the second world war. This consensus involved, in addition to the pooling of common goods such as health, education or culture, a public control over "economic and financial feudalism" (so named by the program of the French National Council of Resistance), while maintaining of course the frame of a market economy supplied by private investments. However, this consensus has progressively broken down, without our being aware of it, under the double influence of a neo-conservative political philosophy that considers the re-distributive tax as a spoliation (see for example the libertarianism of Robert Nozick) and a neoclassical economic theory that accords blind trust to market self-regulation, thus reducing a number of sentimental, moral and legal barriers that made society a common good, and limited the expression of the appetites.

3) Individual and collective addiction

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I'd like to end this presentation with a few clarifications on the concept of addiction and the reasons why I use it as an anthropological analyser of the current evolution of the liberal societies. There are three main meanings of addiction : the etymologic and symbolic one that means prison for debt ; the clinical sense, which considers addiction a disease, whose the well-known symptoms are craving, wanting, compulsive use, loss of control, tolerance, obnubilation, withdrawal suffering and continuing activity despite its negative consequences ; and finally the neurobiological sense, which refers to pathological changes in neurochemical brain arrangements, particularly the dopamine circuit, which is concerned by attention and practical motivation, but also stimulated and possibly changed by all psychoactive substances and practices.

According to NIDA, The National Institute on Drug Abuse in Washington, « addiction is defined as a chronic, relapsing disorder characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use despite adverse consequences ». NIDA's definition adds that addiction is a « brain disorder, because it involves functional changes to brain circuits involved in reward, stress, and self-control ». Now, if we introduce the notion of collective addiction, we immediately see that collective addiction can be understood in the first (symbolic) and perhaps the second meaning (clinical), but not in the third one (neurological), simply because there is no collective brain. I might add that I am moderately Durkheimian and I do not think society is a kind of collective organism, with or without brain. However, if there is no collective addiction in the neurological meaning, there can be collective processes - what Durkheim called « courants sociaux » (social currents) - giving rise to multiple individual addictions. In other words, if addiction is clearly an individual (pathological) habitus, there can be, as Bourdieu said, classes of individual habitus resulting from collective addictive processes.

Indeed, the most part of individual addictions with or without substances find their place in collective incitative processes which are associated to reward promises and boosted by mimetic social contexts, for example feasts contexts for alcohol or hallucinogens, harsh work for legal or illegal stimulants, exchanges of values for money addiction, social deviant settings for crack or heroin, invading advertisings for food or sex, highly consumerist contexts for compulsive purchases, therapeutical contexts for painkillers or benzodiazepines, and so on. That does not mean that causes of addiction would be purely social, but only that social contexts select the objects able to produce addictive trends at the individuals who are confronted with them. Nor that means that all the members of society would be addict or potentially addict, what is non-sense in view of the deep sufferings of people personally concerned with addiction problems, but only that some of them can become so.

All the more so the possibility of a gradual scale between strong addictive states and ordinary life habits without unfortunate consequence is precisely what makes the theoretical model of addiction an interesting analyzer of society. Indeed, according to evolutionary psychology, addiction is a model of behavior focused on the usual search of pleasure and rewards, which is rooted in ancestral neuro-cognitive devices. These devices were acquired in relation namely to parental attachment, sexual attraction or social bonds, and are presently completely integrated into ordinary dispositions of any human being. Actually, people becoming truly addicted are only a minority of the population, but they express much more general anthropological tendencies.

This analysis could be illustrated by the case of economic elites, who contribute to the social and technological progress, but also, for a large part, to the addictive process of current capitalism. As we see in a lot of movies and tv series expressing a widespread diffuse critic consciousness, some of them can suffer individually from diverse addictions to legal or illegal stimulants : amphetamine, cocaine, tobacco..., but also to painkillers, benzodiazepines, alcohol, money, hyper-sexuality, gambling, power, loss of control in social settings, risk taking in professional life, uncontrolled expenses..., or, even more significantly, workaholism, which is and addiction to work having severe consequences for family life. For they can also externalize on third parties the negative consequences of their addictive practices such as speculative frenzies requiring tax increasing to bail out the banks, investments in pesticides production involving problems of public health, intensive lobbying for dangerous drugs under prescription that involve legal addictions and overdoses, etc. Furthermore, it exists today sorts of institutional addictions deposited in digitalized devices and systems of registration, control, following, pricing, rating..., and the use of big data for advertising, police and other monitoring purposes. Of course, robots are not addict but they can express the addictive trends of their designers.

I would have liked to conclude on the ways of "recovering", as we say in Narcotic or Alcoholic Anonymes meetings, from the addictive process of capitalism. But this question is too massive and important to be tackled in a simple conclusion. I would only say that I do not see the solution in a very hypothetical exit from capitalism which, in my opinion, is not only a « system », as we said usually, but a form of life that is strongly linked to the technical progress in biology or in computer sciences, and involves more and more all the inhabitants of the planet as stakeholders. But nothing prevents to think about the reintroduction of a wider portion of communism in the management of political affairs thanks to legal systems of limitation of appetites in business, reinforcements of state regulations on financial transactions, and strong encouragements of new forms of production and consumption as, for example peasant farming, permaculture, fablabs and all the other forms of accomplishment of the « ecological transition ».

Fin du texte