

THE AGE OF THE PLUG

EDITORIAL

We have decided to devote this issue to the concept of “saturation” because we think that saturation is both a widespread feeling and a concept under shock, a concept that must be rethought. As feeling, “saturation” designates something like being fed up. It is a condition of light submersion that is however sufficient to make one drown, as in the beautiful photographs by Alban Grosdidier. One can exit this condition through sudden fits of rage, as in the case of saturation with respect to the immoral behaviors of many politicians. This exit is not an exit, though, and the alternative routes it finds are often nothing else than different ways of becoming entangled even more tightly in the film that wraps us up entirely. When they do not cause explosion, then suffocation, absence of future and exit ways, and excessive compression paralyze and immobilize. “Saturation” indicates a condition of too much fullness. Many political groups take advantage of this feeling by resorting to a physicist conception of space according to which one can no longer continue in this way, and one needs to “empty out the tub.” This image denies all fluidity: the dumping is not a normal fact but rather something that must be conquered by means of force since a plug prevents drainage. We are, in a sense, the age of the plug; the difficulty experienced by progressive forces is due, for the most part, to the inability of finding counter-images capable of solving the hydraulic metaphor in a way that is convincing for all.

Other times “saturation” means something like some sort of practical impossibility that reasonable politics are forced to assume, albeit regretfully. As if there were only ten dosages of vaccine against a deadly virus when there are a thousand children to inoculate. Even with the best intentions, there are not enough vaccines, and in this case politicians and philosophers may be called to propose criteria (always with the risk of aberration) of prioritizing. The crisis of the welfare state confronts us with the fact that the blanket is too short, and we debate about who should remain naked and how.

As a concept, “saturation” perhaps identifies the originary political scene. As if the “political” (in the neutral sense of the political dimension, *das Politische*) had been determined, ever since the beginning, by a confrontation with paucity and overcrowded conditions, and consisted in the wager that finding a solution is possible. At first, the answer is through war and the occupation of others’ spaces. Subsequently and ultimately, it is through peace.

In this political sense, “saturation” would be the originary distributive condition. One must distribute that which is not there. The problem of the “political” is how distribution can emerge from saturation. The left and the right are divided in terms of how to answer such a question. In a completely different manner, they both try to *find* resources that are not there. Precisely because of this, “to find” is a defining verb for political activity. Ultimately, politics is a form of finding.

What ontology, if any, would correspond to such finding? Not the ontology of potency and act, of genus and species. This ontology, as one could remark, has no problems with space ever. The empty space of the genus is filled, perfectly and without residues, with specific differences, as a custom-made kitchen perfectly fits a wall. The ontology of act and potency is well expressed through the verb “to fit.” Another ontology, one that has to do with the “too much,” would have to do away with *fitness*, thereby reinterpreting in this direction Aristotle’s remark that being cannot be a genus. When translated into our terms, this would mean something like: there is no space that is empty enough. Differences do not articulate an empty space; rather, they stand on a space that is already full, so that they can stand there only by counting twice. An overcrowded condition would therefore have to be matched with an ontology in the state of compression, with a metaphysics in tightness.

Philosophically, “saturation” can be said in many ways. For example, it is a fundamental concept in Gottlob Frege: “The statement ‘Caesar conquered Gallia’ can be decomposed into ‘Caesar’ and ‘conquered Gallia.’ The second part is unsaturated (*ungesättigt*), carries within itself an empty space, and only when such an empty space is filled with a proper noun or an expression that functions as a proper noun can one have a complete sense. I call “function” the meaning of the unsaturated part. In this case, the argument is Caesar.”¹

“Saturation” is also a category within Gilles Deleuze’s aesthetics of film. “The frame is therefore inseparable from two tendencies: toward saturation or toward rarefaction.”² As “repleteness,” it is an important concept in Nelson Goodman’s aesthetics.³ More recently, the idea of “saturation” plays an important role in Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology: “it becomes thus possible to consider c) saturated phenomena (*les phénomènes saturés*), in which the intuition always submerges the expectation of the intention.”⁴ Peter Sloterdijk speaks of a “stage of saturation (*Sättigungsphase*)”⁵ in a philosophical-political sense.

If we go further back in time, “saturation” is a concept in philosophy of chemistry, for example in Hegel’s *Logic*.⁶

Keeping these reflections on the background, and sometimes explicitly following up on them, the essays contained in this issue are overall characterized by a greater emphasis on the historical-social side of the category—“saturation” not so much as fullness or completion but rather as suffering and pain. The paradox is that, despite this negative nuance, “saturation” appears not as something to be eliminated (following the

¹ GOTTLLOB FREGE, *Funktion und Begriff* (1891), in *Kleine Schriften*, ed. I. Angelelli (Hildesheim: Olms, 1967), p. 134.

² GILLES DELEUZE, *Cinéma 1: L’image-Mouvement* (Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1983), p. 23.

³ NELSON GOODMAN, *Languages of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 230. Here one can find, as later in Deleuze, the pair saturation/rarefaction.

⁴ JEAN-LUC MARION, *Étant donné* (Paris: PUF, 1998), p. 314.

⁵ PETER SLOTERDIJK, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 2005, p. 22.

⁶ See GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Erster Band, *Die objektive Logik*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 11 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1978), p. 212. Hegel’s expression is: “zu einem Maaße der Sättigung (in a measure of saturation.”

path of apheresis, cuts, and decreases) but rather as a resource. As if only through the long path of saturation could one gain a more radical notion of distribution and democracy. Saturation brings war. Peace, which is the opposite of war, occurs in the same place, as an exit with no exit from the condition of suffocation. For this reason, the destiny of spaces that are small and too saturated, such as those of Israel and Palestine, appears as the fundamental hermeneutic key for our future. Once we arrive, as it were, at the end of lands, spaces (which are lacking) can no longer be conquered; rather, they need to be invented. *To find* spaces, as well as to find resources, has become one of the privileged words of “the political.” How this can happen not through cuts and redistributions alone and even less through conquests and expulsions but through an increased space, an augmented reality—this is the puzzle that is facing us.

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(Translated by Silvia Benso)