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Hearing the economy – notes on *Economic Score*

Matthieu Saladin

The history of capitalism is not only an economic and political one, it is also a history of images and representations. Capitalism, its movements and operations, at once global and local, are *figured* by all kinds of plans, graphs, tables and diagrams whose curves and histograms intersect and intertwine. Quantitative distributions are established and flows are charted and indexed by *relations of relations* between receipts and expenses, imports and exports, growth and debt, and so forth. As Susan Buck-Morss suggested, the emergence in the mid-18th century of such representations that make capital visible (the first of which being François Quesnay's 1766 *Economic Table*) came in the wake of another type of representation: naval charts. Like the latter, economic tables are not mere *a posteriori* representations of a reality: they have retroactive effects on it. As it becomes visible, economic activity thereby affects the very means of perception: "The map shifts the point of view so that viewers can see the whole as if from the outside, in a way that allows them, from a specific position inside, to find their bearings¹."

The graphic modalities of capital's visibility develop other relations that play a role in organizing its rationality. In the first place, the formalization of the economic discourse is historically rooted in an ambition to achieve the exactness of the scientific model—what Frédéric Lordon calls economics' "desire to make science," especially through mathematization². As a segment of the history of sciences, this history of visual representations of the economy testifies to the patient construction of the concept of objectivity, in which "making a scientific image is part of making a scientific self [...]: to learn to observe and depict in a science is to acquire at once an ethos and a way of seeing³." Stemming from an earlier history, musical writing as it developed in the West has been affected in a similar fashion by the determinations inherent to its notation system. As composer Cornelius Cardew observed,

¹ Susan Buck-Morss, "Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 2, Winter 1995, p. 440.

² Frédéric Lordon, "Le désir de faire science", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 119, September 1997; *La Société des affects. Pour un structuralisme des passions*, Paris: Seuil, 2013, p. 37-42.

³ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York: Zone Books, 2007, p. 363-7.

musical notation is a language that determines what you can say, what you want to say determines your language. As a composer you have both aspects in your hand, but when you come to open your hand you find only one thing, and it is not divisible⁴.

As a representation, notation became a virtually independent discipline at the turn of the 14th century. It then gained in sophistication and progressively freed itself from performance. The development of this complexity also came with a certain musical esotericism—a constructed abstrusity resulting in part from skillfully maintained power relations. Just like any other graphic system requiring a specific form of literacy, its purpose was to distinguish the initiated who had access to the field of knowledge from those who were excluded from it⁵.

The *Economic Score* project brings together these two forms of writing and visual representation, which seem to belong to separate spheres, but which nonetheless partake, each in their own way, in the history of Western rationality: the economic table and musical notation. The project was initiated in 2013 during a residency at the CAC Brétigny, in France, and was subsequently activated several times, in particular in January 2017, during the inauguration of *Kunst Am Bau*, at the head office of the Erste Bank in Vienna. Although part of a cultural event, this latest activation was specific in the sense that it did not take place in an arts center or a museum, as it had previously, but in a bank—*i.e.* in the very place finance operates. The principle at work is identical each time, although specific activations can require that the protocol be slightly adapted: generally speaking, the piece consists in the transposition of a cultural economy into a musical score. The economy in question is that of the event (exhibit, festival, residency, etc.) hosting its activation. In other words, the material used in the *ad hoc* composition is exclusively comprised of the event's economic data—which includes the various costs necessary to activate the piece, amongst all of the expenses related to the manifestation. The system of transposition is relatively simple: it involves substituting a unit determining either the (microtonal) pitches or the duration of the notes for the reference monetary unit of the budget⁶. If need be, a proportional calculation is also applied⁷.

⁴ Cornelius Cardew, "Notation – Interpretation, etc.," *Tempo*, Summer 1961, in *A Reader. A Collection of Cornelius Cardew's Published Writings*, Essex: Copula, 2006, p. 6.

⁵ See Jean-Yves Bosseur, *Du Son au signe. Histoire de la notation musicale*, Paris, Editions Alternatives, 2005, p. 43-44.

⁶ For example, my composing fees for the inauguration of *Kunst Am Bau* added up to 2,000 euros, which in the score corresponded to an F₂ -37 cents (an F -37 cents in German notation).

⁷ This calculation occurs when budgets present figures whose corresponding pitches are beyond the spectrum of the human ear, as was the case in Vienna.

The score is organized around three “tables”, that musicians, called upon for the occasion, jointly use to prepare for the performance that takes place during the event. The notes and silences that have to be played are given by the “table of expenses”. Each indicated expense thus becomes a note, whereas confidential expenses, which were not communicated to me, become silences. The assignable durations are given by the “table of incomes”. Finally, the possible relations between the two first tables are organized by the “table of periods”, scrupulously following the logic of the budget—that is the relations between notes-expenses and durations-incomes, but also potential simultaneities, repetitions or mutual exclusions of two or several parts of the score. The dynamics of each note is furthermore determined, as the performance unfolds, by the audience’s degree of attention: the more carefully it listens, the more *piano* the dynamics; the less it does, the more *forte* the dynamics. The score’s libretto is distributed to the audience prior to the performance, which ends once the entire score has been interpreted.

Thus, the score makes visible and audible—including the periods of silences of the hidden and hushed expenses—a facet of the organization of artistic manifestations that public as well as private institutions usually don’t share with the audience, despite the fact that it conditions their very existence: their economy, the circulation of money between the different sources of financing and the various expenses, from artist and curator fees to insurances, transportation, production and rental expenses, via staff costs (education and visitor assistance, stage management, maintenance, catering, public relations and more). For all that, the intention is to reveal to the audience not only coded data it usually ignores but to propose a reading and a listening, through a substitute system of representation—musical notation—that shifts its intelligibility. The transposition leads to an aesthetic experience, namely a sensory affection that at the same time paradoxically confines its material and its condition of possibility to an irreducible abstraction. As Adorno rightly noted, the logic of fetishism defined by Marx does not refer exclusively to a capitalist process; it can be found just as well—although in a different way—in the relation to works whose alleged nature is supposed to embody an alternative to capitalism. In other words, the fetishism of heteronomy and that of autonomy might have common roots: the mystification they entail, of which they are both agents and products⁸.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* [1938], in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York: Continuum, 1982; *Aesthetic Theory* [1970], New York: Continuum, 1997, p. 252 *sqq.*

The manifestation organized for the inauguration of *Kunst Am Bau* was entitled *Der Canaletto-Blick*, echoing both the view from the Erste Bank architectural complex and Bernardo Bellotto's painting, *View of Vienna from the Belvedere* (1759-60), which represents the city according to the geometrical rules inherited from Renaissance perspective. The score created for this occasion was interpreted by a string quartet⁹ in the executive meeting room on the twelfth floor of the main building, where a preparatory print of Bellotto's canvas was also presented. This adjustable room has two large bay windows; the angle formed at their junction points towards the historical view. In order to highlight the location's architecture, the musicians played at each corner of the room, leaving the center void and available to the audience, thus surrounding it with the music.

The performance itself was part of a program: it was preceded and followed by two Bach cantatas selected for their contemporaneity with the painting that, conceptually, structured the whole event, as well as for their librettos' explicit references to the capitalist economy, or more globally to the concept of debt: *Tue Rechnung! Donnerwort* (BWV 168) and *Der Friede sei mit dir* (BWV 158)¹⁰. Indeed, in the second aria of the first cantata, the tenor sings:

<i>Kapital und Interessen</i>	Capital and interest
<i>Meine Schulden groß und klein</i>	My debts great and small
<i>Müssen einst verrechnet sein.</i>	Must one day be settled.

Such lyrics that invoke capital and governing by debt aren't isolated elements, and can be found in other cantatas from the same period¹¹. While their librettos were written with the gospel in mind, they also bear witness to the local political economy. The pieces could refer to specific events that had occurred in the city, to current events, and more generally, served to interpellate the Leipzig bourgeoisie. Commenting on *Tue Rechnung! Donnerwort*, Gilles Cantagrel emphasizes the fact that its libretto is "typical of Lutheran pragmatism, and was certainly very useful to 'convey' teachings to the faithful of a city of merchants¹²." These cantatas also remind us that the concept of debt has a genealogy in economic and religious history. As Nietzsche had already diagnosed, the concept has a moral origin. Its purpose is to

⁹ Samhaber-Eckhardt (violin), Nina Pohn (violin), Katharina Pöttinger (viola), Peter Trefflinger (violoncello), and Rupert Huber (conduct).

¹⁰ For the cantata parts, the musicians, grouped in a larger ensemble, faced the belvedere. In addition to the string quartet: Rosemarie Schobersberger (soprano), Christa Ratzenböck (alto), Markus Miesenberger (tenor), Andreas Lebeda (bass), Martina Schobersberger (cembalo), Elisabeth Baumer (oboe), Molly McDolan (oboe).

¹¹ This theme appears for example in *Es wartet alles auf dich* (BWV 187), *Mer hahn en neue Oberkeet* (BWV 212), which mentions taxes and bankruptcy in the course of an erotic conversation, or *Was soll ich aus dir machen, Ephraim?* (BWV 89). Originally, this last piece had been picked, but had to be abandoned for logistical reasons, and was replaced with BWV 158.

¹² Gilles Cantagrel, *Les Cantates de J. S. Bach*, Paris, Fayard, 2010, p. 810.

inscribe in the subject's body—*i.e.* to intervene in its very subjectivation—a mode of government whose effectiveness arises from its temporality, a phenomenon that still holds true today. The relation between creditor and debtor is based on a pledge: a control of the former over the future of the latter, who is obliged to reimburse the contracted debt, thus paving the way for a government by anticipation. In the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, which deals with “‘guilt’, ‘bad conscience’, and related matters”, Nietzsche writes:

In order to have that degree of control over the future, man must first have learnt to distinguish between what happens by accident and what by design, to think causally, to view the future as the present and anticipate it, to grasp with certainty what is end and what is means, in all, to be able to calculate, compute—and before he can do this, man himself will really have to become *reliable, regular, necessary*, even in his own self-image, so that he, as someone making a promise, is answerable for his own *future!*¹³

If neoliberalism is the name given to an “economization” of every single aspect of life, or “the conversion of non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones¹⁴”, this process also intervenes as a dominant ideological force in the production of subjectivities, as well as in how contemporary imaginations are structured. The neoliberal imagination, an essential cog in the production of representations and images, functions “first and foremost as a means of covering the reality of the relations of production and as a tool of generalized narrative and doctrinal fluidization¹⁵”. Yet, although the imagination thus contributes to the interiorization of the dominant order, it also fosters alternative projections, a dialectic that reveals the porosity of both processes. By simultaneously associating reading the libretto and listening to the performance of *Economic Score*, this imagination reenacts the transposition from one system to another—that of an economy to its music.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 36. For a comment on Nietzsche's analysis, see Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man. An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* [2011], Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012, ch. 2.

¹⁴ Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics”, *Constellations. An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, vol. 23, no. 1, March 2016, p. 3.

¹⁵ François Cusset, Thierry Labica and Véronique Rauline, “Introduction”, *Imaginaires du néolibéralisme*, Paris: La Dispute, 2016, p. 19.