

The ecosophy of the project

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A project never develops in the straight line of the goals it originally set itself. Instead it advances gradually, in relation to its own terms, and the ensuing gaps and distances are an integral part of its development. A project does not move forward in a linear way as would an undertaking calibrated to the resources it started out with, unfolding bit by bit in perfect continuity with itself. It does not remain fixed in a limited horizon of possibilities. On the contrary, a project reacts and is receptive to the multiple pitfalls and vicissitudes it will inevitably encounter. It demonstrates, in other words, a real ecosophical quality by staying attentive to its environment and open to the numerous interactions in which it necessarily participates.¹

Project-based interventions have become thoroughly trivialized, particularly in the field of public policy. Intervention projects are legion, and each one targets its population and territory of implementation precisely. How are these projects conceived? How do they relate to the governmentability of society as a whole?² Into what ideological and functional perspectives are they inscribed? The way in which projects are defined and put into practice is a political and strategic question. As a matter of fact, public policy makes use of intervention projects to address social issues as closely as possible to their particular contexts, at the pulse of their life and activity. It is by multiplying and implementing such projects that public policy reinforces its biopolitical influence and its ability to thoroughly infiltrate and shape life from within.

Between 2000 and 2004, Pierre Buisson and I investigated these issues in the context of the Social Development program at the University of Montpellier 3.

1. Constitutive exteriority

The evolution of a project can be read as a process of successive translations and displacements, in relation to events confronted along the way or challenges to be overcome, such as the integration of a new partner with different interests, an unexpected change that affects the project's environment, the appearance of a new issue or an unusual request, and so forth. Each of these risks can give rise to a partial or total recasting of the project, and this uncertainty is constitutive of its development. The project is thus not restricted to the motives and motivations it started out with, but is constantly restructuring as it moves forward. It progresses by differentiating and modifying its own make-up. A project thus never proceeds in perfect agreement with what was anticipated or planned at its inception. The resulting gaps or discrepancies aren't signs of failure or dysfunction—on the contrary, they indicate a genuine quality: the power that every action has to displace itself, to focus on other modalities of existence, to open up new horizons, or to change the very way it functions. Following Bruno Latour, I would like to oppose two different conceptions of the project. According to the first conception, which we will call "reified," a project is calibrated to the logic "embedded" in it at the beginning (i.e., its programming). According to the second conception, which I consider to be far more appropriate, a project constructs itself step by step and does not reveal its logic until it has run its course—a logic it has been acquiring and testing throughout its progress rather than a logic that defined and

1 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*. London: The Athlone Press, 2000. According to Guattari, ecosophy is a way in which we can reinvent our relationship to others (social ecology), our relationship to ourselves (mental ecology), and our relationship to the environment in which we live (urban ecology). His philosophy thus invites us to think the project not only from the point of view of what it incorporates in itself, but also from the point of view of what it implies for others.

2 Michel Foucault uses the term "governmentability" to refer to all the dispositives, procedures, calculations, tactics, analyses, and systems of thought that allow for life to be managed in its entirety and a population in its specificity. Cf. *Security, Territory, Population (Lectures at the Collège de France. 1977-1978)*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

guided it from the beginning. In the first case, all the possible considerations pertaining to the project (its values, objectives, means, partners, etc.) are embedded in it from the moment it casts off its lines, and follow it faithfully. The project remains identical to itself; it develops by deploying from within, as if it were progressively actualizing what it has incorporated from the beginning: secondary objectives take over from the first, and the various stages succeed one another without encountering any opposition. In this scenario, the achievement of a project corresponds to a kind of recapitulation of its initial composition. Its logic accompanies it as it sets sail and functions like a force of inertia, like an inner thrust forcing it to take place. The project is measured by this logic, a kind of *embedded logic* that is not much different from mere programming. The second approach, on the other hand, privileges an *ecosophical logic*.³ In this case, the project does not “prevail” on its own, by simple inertia, but draws its strength from the numerous social relations (sexual, practical, epistemic, etc.) that come together in the project and with which it has to struggle. Here the project cannot be disassociated from its own ecology—from all the outsides that define it, confront it, and allow it to exist. Bruno Latour writes: “All projects are stillborn at the outset. Existence has to be added to them continuously, so they can take on body, can impose their growing coherence on those who argue about them or oppose them. No project is born viable, effective, or brilliant.”⁴ Every issue that opposes it gives the project the opportunity to affirm its own singularity or to reinforce its own presence. Every new context it ventures into supplements its existence and adds the meaning necessary for it to move forward. Every “exteriority” against which it measures itself forces it to strengthen its point of view and to assume its own difference.⁵

2. Forms of mutual benefit

The classical ideology of the project states that people who get involved do so on the basis of a common interest. A prior agreement is essential; a compromise has to be reached before anything else can happen. On the contrary, it is our point of view that a project can only succeed if people of varied, indeed disparate, interests agree to devote themselves collectively to a process, knowing that it is up to them to define, delimit, characterize, and negotiate it. The partners commit themselves of one accord without necessarily agreeing on the entire program. The likelihood of seeing a project through to the end is bound to be quite slim if all the participants have to be in agreement about the essentials from the outset. “If all the participants had to unanimously agree on the definition of what has to be done, the probability of realization would be quite low, since the real remains polymorphous for a long time [...]. On the contrary, it is preferable that, at the beginning, different groups with divergent interest conspire in a sort of blur about a project they have in common, a project that in this way can become an agent of translation and exchange of goals.”⁶ (Shared) interest for the project does not exist at the outset but emerges as an effect of mutual benefit throughout the progress of reflection and action. It is thus neither an asset nor a prerequisite, but a construct. This socio-political “construct” intermixes motives and motivations that will inevitably differ

3 “Ecosophical logic” is a term coined by Félix Guattari, op. cit.

4 Bruno Latour *Aramis ou l'amour des techniques*, La Découverte, 1993, p. 72.

5 The idea of a *constitutive exterior* is crucial Chantal Mouffe's argument: “By showing that the condition of existence for any form of identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an *other* that will serve as its *exterior*, we can understand the permanence of the antagonism as well as its conditions of emergence.” *Le politique et ses enjeux (Pour une démocratie plurielle)*, La Découverte – MAUSS, 1994, p. 13. On this basis, she firmly rejects the paradigm of deliberative democracy, which essentially devotes itself to defusing the potential of antagonism that nevertheless exists in every social relation.

6 Bruno Latour, op. cit., p. 47.

from each other. The challenge then is not to find and formulate, from the outset, a compromise between the particular interests stated as such, a priori, but to make all of these particular preferences evolve in a democratic confrontation contained in the very movement of the intervention itself. One of the reasons for being of a project is precisely to bring about the “common” and the “shared,” and to bring them about within a particular situation, in a given circumstance, by battling it out with each particular actuality. Projects are not created cold, on the basis of who knows what kind of arbitration or settlement, but in the heat of the moment, tuned into the antagonist and polemical potential inherent in any kind of social situation. As Chantal Mouffe insists, “it is not a matter of establishing an alliance between given interests, but of modifying the very identity of forces at play.”⁷ It is a matter of elaborating a theory of the project as a decentralized and detotalized process, at the intersection of a multiplicity of interests that are neither bound by any obligatory agreement nor by a definitively established equilibrium. A project does not contain from the beginning the conditions of its success, but acquires them by function of the interest the participants bring to it. This is how it comes to fruition or is undone; how it progressively gains or loses existence.

3. A multiplicity of precedences

A project cannot be boiled down to its current realities and is neither exhausted by its achievements nor held back by them. Put another way, a project also preserves a certain degree of *receptivity* with which it can incorporate new expectations or face new challenges. This plurality is made manifest when participants give an account of their experience with a project. Each individual account reveals or invents “conditions of possibility,” assumed or not, implementable or not, explicit or silent. Each account revisits the project from the perspective of different desires or opportunities. There is no need for an official history. It is not a matter of reconnecting with the alleged truth of a process (the way in which it was defined in its inception, according to the original formulation of objectives), but of constructing it in a different way, of shaping it on the basis of another context of action or another experience. It is by means of extension and redeployment, of singularization and pluralization, that the project attains its own historicity, and not by the survival of an original statement or the repetition of a founding experience. All of the participants, and especially the initiators of the process, have to accept that the project calls itself by “its own name”⁸ and makes a multiplicity of precedences its own, not only those of its founders but also those of the many people that join in for their “own” reasons. The initiators also have to accept that the project will be taken up again elsewhere and in different ways, and on such occasions will repeat its method and approach in a different environment. The project is thus faced with a double challenge: it is traversed by a wide variety of accounts, each one of which expressing a fragment of its history; and it is confronted by new circumstances that force it to reappraise its progress in relation to the contributions and innovations that the unaccustomed context provides. As a result it faces a decisive question, which Luce Giard formulates this way: “To what extent can the plurality of differences be sustained?”⁹—meaning both the plurality of proper names and the multiple contexts of intervention. The question is a strategic one: to what degree can a project reconsider or renew itself without dissolving its political and/or professional ambition? In this sense, it

7 Chantal Mouffe, op. cit., p. 41.

8 The proper name understood here as a “demonstration of existence” according to Michel de Certeau in *La faiblesse de croire*, coll. Points-essais, 1987, p. 274.

9 In her introduction to Michel de Certeau’s *La prise de parole (et autres écrits politiques)*, coll. Points-essais, 1994, p. 17.

is necessary that the assemblage of the project include feedback at sufficiently frequent intervals. This allows experiments to be reconstructed by being “relived.” It is a way of restoring memory of the events as well as of giving an account of how they were integrated, appropriated, and modulated. By reconstructing and restoring experiments in an active relation to the historicity of the process, in a dynamic form of “reliving” and “resingularization,” participants in the project can preserve the meaning of their activities, without thereby reducing it to a single perspective or restricting it to a mere reaffirmation of the given. “It is a matter of nothing less than a reconstitution by reliving—and hence also by reformulating—an original creation [...]. It is a journey against time. It is a reconstruction of the experiment by each [participant], a reconstruction than can be compared with those of the others.”¹⁰ What Philippe Zarifian refers to as an experiential analysis thus allows for us to regard a particular situation from a distance while at the same time continuing to contribute to its development. This kind of analysis permits us to stay in touch with the context of action while addressing it from a variety of viewpoints.

4. Maintaining receptiveness and porosity

A project, in our view, is always oscillating between two necessities: establishing *dispositives* essential to its performance, and maintaining maximum *receptiveness* so as to attract the participation and interest of individuals. A project must remain accessible so as to integrate a diversity of initiatives and practices. While dispositives (processes, methodologies, recommendations, etc.) guarantee the continuity of a process, receptiveness introduces porosity. The dispositives re-articulate and reconnect that which action has the tendency to separate. Dispositives make up the functional framework of the process. Receptiveness, on the other hand, is a quality not of proper functioning but of open-minded practice and participation. The dispositives relate to the project in the way in which it is organized and regulated; receptiveness relates to the project in the way in which it is practiced and lived. In the first case, the project bases its existence on procedures and methods; in the second, it liberates experiments thanks to the many forms of involvement that give it meaning. By appealing to this distinction, we want to emphasize the fact that a project never completely conforms to its own execution and that it is only ever imperfectly represented by the dispositives that allow it to act and exist. It thus never totally coincides with its own functioning. Between the project and its dispositives of organization and regulation, zones of silence are interspersed, lines of flight are drawn, the promise of an opening suggests itself. The notion of *receptiveness* seeks to account for this gap, where other kinds of involvement and practice can assert themselves, making for an irreducible discordance. But how is this discordance to be invested, worked through, developed? Will the “carriers” of the project try their best to systematically fill in the openings that appear? Will they try at any cost to preserve the original project against the discordant one they unexpectedly find themselves faced with when a proposal is put forward that does not perfectly agree with the original goals? How will they negotiate this gap? How “receptive” is the project really? How large is its scope? How great its leeway of opinion and action? To summarize, we can say that a project necessarily disposes of a certain degree of receptivity, since it can never completely control the process it sets in motion. It is always situated beyond or on this side of its anticipated performance and always maintains a certain degree of receptivity. But this receptivity can turn on individuals, particularly the promoters of the project; it can put them up against a wall. Will they respond by trying to bury it under an excess of expectations, precautions, and

10 Philippe Zarifian, *Le travail et l'événement*, éd. L'Harmattan, 1995, p. 72.

programming? Will they remain on the lookout, worried about the slightest gap, ready to silence the least discordance? Projects are far too often made in the image of their promoters, who are overly concerned about living up to the original program, unwilling to let gaps open up, and *unreceptive* to new demands. Cautious and suspicious, they stick to procedure and are powerless in the face of new *dispositives* over which they have no control. On the other hand, by maintaining its porosity, a project “authorizes” a wide range of applications and a plurality of practices, allowing it to avoid the usual difficulties: action made impossible by the omnipresence of rules or abandoned because of intimidation—in other words, because of an excessive specialization that discourages non-initiates, or “authorized” statements that have the effect of silencing others.