

I WHY DO SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING?

*Motivated, motivated,
We must be motivated.*

—Neo-Trotskyist refrain

To get a donkey to move forward, nothing is better than the proverbial carrot and stick. At least that's how the story goes. Having known a few muleskinners myself, I never saw a single one resort to this technique. But whatever the reality may be, it's a useful metaphor that, like many popular expressions, contains and condenses phenomena that are more complex than they seem. From the outset, let's be clear that it is a question of the carrot *and* the stick, and not one or the other. There's not an option, but rather a dialectical relation between the two terms. No carrot without the stick, and vice versa. The stick alone, physical punishment without the carrot, is not enough to encourage continuous and resolute forward progress in the animal. The beaten mule will snort, reluctantly take a few steps, but then stop moving at the first opportunity. To use managerial language: stick beatings are not *efficient*. In fact, the real effect of the stick is indirect—a permanent threat that can be unleashed at the least sign of diminished effort. It is enough that the donkey realizes that he can be hit, either because he has a painful memory of the experience or because he sees mules around him being hit. It gets him to move, not to reach a goal, but to avoid pain. Specialists describe this phenomenon as a “second-

ary negative motivation.” In the ideal situation, it shouldn’t even be necessary to hit the animal, because he has completely internalized the threat. His “interior stick” will seem like an improvement on the condition of mules. He will say: “We have nothing to complain about. Previously we were beaten cruelly. Now our life is nicer.” The philosopher Norbert Elias called this tendency *the process of the civilization of manners*. Nonetheless, all teachers are well aware that every punishment has to be paired with the promise of a reward. Coercion without reward won’t work for long. One isn’t motivated solely by avoiding something, but by that plus attaining gratification.

Here’s where the carrot comes in, as somebody dangles it from a stick in front of the animal’s nose. If the psychological forces unleashed by the shaking of the stick are relatively crude, those that are unleashed by the carrot are more complex. First, the animal not only has to see the carrot, but must see only that; so it must be arranged that all other objects disappear from his sight. To achieve this effect trainers have, from time immemorial, used *blinders*. Depending on the sophistication of the donkey, there are various types. For example, some let in light from a specific direction, leaving everything else in shadow so as not to distract the donkey from his goal. Anything that is not the carrot is either an ideology involving absolute evil or an impractical utopia. Yet as effective as this approach is, it is still coercive. Sometimes a donkey will buck at this authoritarian restriction of his visual field. Keep in mind that the purpose of the carrot is precisely to promote free and voluntary progress. It is easy to

see that the best way to focus the will of the animal on a single object is to take away everything else around him so that nothing can distract him from his desire. In the desert there is no need for blinders. So a desert must be made.

Once you capture the donkey's attention, the real work begins. There are two competing sets of interests: the donkey wants to eat the carrot; the donkey trainer wants the donkey to walk. How do we reconcile the two? The animal has to substitute his internal motivation (hunger, desire) for the external one (the carrot, and the path to obtain it). This phase is called *identification*. Next, once he is hooked, he has to change his behavior and do what is necessary to reach his goal. There is a greater chance of success if the subject is convinced that he is acting freely and without any outside influence. This is the phase known as *adaptation*. It spreads easily in mammals with a more social nature than with donkeys, which are more solitary—so let's add a few colleagues. For at this stage a key phenomenon comes into play. Each individual colleague believes he has to take a step forward. Why? Because he is convinced that all the others will take a step as well. This is called *emulation* or free competition. Each believes because he has no choice but to believe, since everyone else believes—"everyone else" being the sum of each person who believes, etc. It's how a perception becomes an "incontrovertible reality."

The next phase in the process is called *well-sublimated failure*. For there is clearly no question of whether the goal can be achieved, otherwise he would stop walking and enjoy his

success and the whole thing would have been in vain. Still, it is essential to keep the animal from thinking that all hope of success is impossible, which would equally compromise his forward motion. Satisfaction should appear as deferred but never unreachable. The unsuccessful attempt should be compensated, that is, converted into a growing effort. This is the most delicate moment. Here specialists in positive thinking encourage the donkeys with maxims like this one, coined by Churchill: “Success is the ability to move from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

Once this stage is reached, the worst is over. Going forward, one can count on another factor known as *routine*. The animal continues along on its path at a regular pace, no longer asking the question why. More precisely, the question is inverted for him. He will ask himself: what reason do I have to stop? What matters now is no longer the relevance of the motivation that got him going, but the absence of sufficiently powerful alternative motivations that would lead him to question the path he is on. Also, so long as an imperious reason doesn't draw him away from his current behavior, he will continue working.

Let's admit it: the fact that donkeys are systematically fooled by such a simple approach doesn't speak well for their powers of discernment. Nevertheless, in their favor, one should acknowledge that they don't have a donkeys' union, demanding: “more carrots, fewer sticks!” It is a well-known fact that, at the end of the trail, the most deserving donkey enjoys the juiciest carrot. That wasn't so long ago. For the global context no longer

permits that sort of generosity. Subject to brutal competition, the muleskinners are not likely to waste expensive carrots in this manner. In order to lower the cost of labor, they substitute colorful images of juicy carrots, or they hire communications specialists who try to persuade the donkeys that the pole from which nothing is hanging is itself a succulent dish. Or that the stick will transform itself into a carrot when one is beaten on the back enough. We have to admire their efforts.

What I have outlined in broad strokes is nothing other than the theory of motivation as it is distilled in austere treatises of psychology and put into practice in expensive seminars. What is a motive? It is in the most basic sense *that which leads to movement*. By extension it is a reason to act. Motivation is, then, the creation and communication of motives to get people to move in a direction that is seen as useful, or (to speak the language of our times) to make them continuously more *flexible* and *mobile*.

In all sectors of society today the battle over motivation is raging. The unemployed don't earn the right to exist unless they present proof that they are constantly searching for nonexistent jobs. During the employment interview, it isn't so much competence that matters as the enthusiastic demonstration of flawless subservience. Those who still have work can only hope to keep their position by identifying heart and soul with the firm, letting themselves be led wherever this loyalty takes them, embracing its "cause" for better or (more often) for worse. And the reality of motivation doesn't stop at the office door. It is also imposed on the consumer who is required to be attentive to all the lat-

est products and to confirm his loyalty to the brands that have hooked him. And on the adolescent who must be formed—perhaps we should say be *formatted*—according to the demands of the market, no less than on the elderly who have to pay off their debt to a world that has had the generosity of keeping them alive. Regardless of age, the viewer has to make increasing amounts of brainpower available to receive the endless stream of media bits that constitute his reality. Once the television is off, there are still all of the artists who want to *make him move*, the activists who want to *mobilize* him, the time and relationships that he has to *manage*, and his own image that he is forced to *make more dynamic*; in brief, there is not a moment that shouldn't be under the regime of the useful, under the categorical imperative of movement. Nothing but carrots for such miserable donkeys!

Motivation is a central question of our epoch and it is bound to become even more so. This is first of all because total commodification demands it. Today everything is subject to commerce: every desire, every aspiration, and every impulse. The flagship products that dominate the market are not just any objects supposed to perform this or that function, but rather slices of prefabricated lifestyles. And the consumer must identify with them; he must make their motives his own. Each of us has within our beings what were once known as “the passions of the soul” as well as a heritage of previous traditions (at least what is left of them). This entire inventory must be mobilized, remodeled, packaged, labeled, made exchangeable with products of equal value. So as much at the beginning of the process, in what

we still call work, as further down, in what can be called consumption (though these two moments are increasingly difficult to distinguish), it's a matter of making it so that people's minds are entirely *occupied* by this infinite task.

The second reason motivation is more crucial than ever is that the real needs of individuals to which social institutions once claimed to respond (we could mention among others, the need for stability, the thirst for social encounters, the pleasure of mutual recognition, the hope for a better life) have been systematically destroyed by market colonization. The ideals and the promises that in good and bad times were the cause of compromise and renunciation are henceforward labeled as archaisms that must be completely and quickly annihilated. If people need to be constantly motivated, it is because they are increasingly de-motivated. In the employment sector, all the indicators point to a decrease in "investment" on the part of workers in their jobs. This is not only the case among precarious and poorly paid workers, but also among middle management and top executives. In the consumer sector, the major markets are seeing a growing dissatisfaction among customers, to an increasing extent due to a saturation effect: the result of a decreasing interest in making purchases more than the fabled "decline in purchasing power." In the media sector, the homogenization of information (in form as well as content) appears to be creating a global crisis of confidence. As for the political sphere, the principle of communicating vessels between government and opposition, according to which the decline in popularity of one

brought about an equal rise in that of the other, has generally ceased to apply in democratic nations. There is just one ideology left and it is met with unanimous disinterest. In a more general sense, “the imperative of growth,” to which everything else is subordinated, but whose purpose is more and more difficult to discern, is no longer enough to justify the sacrifices required.

To sum it up, the more the markets need motivation from the people, the more they lack it. The more the system’s technological devices appear irresistible, the weaker their ability to solicit voluntary cooperation. At the very moment when global capital seems to have removed all external obstacles that formerly slowed its development, an internal factor threatens it: the growing dissatisfaction of its human resources, without which the system is nothing. This is the soft underbelly of the colossus. Contrary to what Marx believed, in the end the limit to World Trade, Inc.¹ might not be objective, but subjective, namely: the tendency of the rate of motivation to fall. Of all the factors that contribute to this state of affairs, the traffic jam plays a special role. The story is

1 Everyone has a vague idea of what capitalism is. But many would have a really hard time giving a definition. Of course there is one—there are many, even; nevertheless it is good to be wary of the falsities that the usage of a generic term ends up carrying, as it will tend to close the possibility of reexamination. The familiar is not necessarily the known. In his complete works, Marx did not write the word “capitalism” one single time; he had no need to. At the same time, it is difficult to not give a name to that which so clearly makes up a system. Here I will use the term World Trade, Inc., not because it is more precise, but on the contrary because it is a figure and not a concept, which keeps a certain allusive distance from what is signified. I could have just as easily said “the big thingy.” But World Trade, Inc. is a bit more explicit. It’s clearly something global, with a central activity that is commercial, and is also something that is incorporated, which is to say, embodied by corporations.

well known. Everybody buys a car, promising individual freedom, speed and power, only to find himself stuck in traffic because other motorists, driven by the same motives, did the same thing. But it is too late to be able to do without a car. However, suddenly a new product is released offering that special something, as well as freedom, to its owner. Everyone hurries to buy it, with, of course, the same result. In this situation it isn't really accurate to say we are in a traffic jam; the bitter truth is that we *are* the traffic jam! To the extent that congestion extends from one end of the market to another, the life span of each supposed motive leading there decreases. The obvious approach is to rapidly create new motives, but the likely result is that they will end up creating their own motive-jam. It is not just that people overwhelmed with temptations won't know where to turn their attention, but the traffic jam will likely result also in the other direction—brands trying to reach increasingly unavailable customers.

And that is not all, because getting caught in traffic jams makes the workday longer and results in lower pay per hour. It is logical: the more people end up being included, the less the role of each person in creating wealth, and the more each is an interchangeable unit. There is always someone somewhere who will do what you do for less. And so the gap between the promised land *as seen on TV* and the real world widens. The era in which we were promised that Progress would bring not only more goods, but also less work, is over. From now on everyone subject to the market is constantly in a double bind: expect lower pay and consume more; be creative and admit that there is

no alternative; be loyal and remember that you are replaceable at will; be a unique individual and submit to the needs of the team; be egotistical and be ashamed to defend your interests; orgasm and at the same time practice abstinence. If you obey one order, you will disobey the other. Now you go and be motivated under such conditions!

Many people have pointed out the crisis of motivation in order to condemn this crisis. I believe, rather, that we should welcome this situation as an opportunity. If you distrust the pace at which things are changing, better to slow down. If you're unsure of your escape route ahead, it is advised you turn away from the carrots dangled in front of you. If capitalism has as an essential precondition the motivation of its agents, it is logical to conclude that for the opponents and victims of its development, demotivation is a necessary stage.

When I told my circle that I planned to write this elegy, I noted a certain disapproval, or at least a manifest lack of comprehension in my interlocutors. I get it: as if we weren't demotivated enough as it is! As if our epoch doesn't suffer from chronic anomie, from a dramatic absence of motives. Isn't the problem rather that the ideals, the general objectives, the utopias, the reasons to act that animated previous generations have disappeared from the surface of the social field? And certainly a long list of today's motives would look more like a cemetery of uniforms and liveries, as Duchamp put it.

As for the Left, what happened to the strategies of rupture, self-management, the power of the soviets, the tomorrows

when anything is possible? There has been a clear defeat of those who thought that socialism actually existed in some part of the world. But also the denial, based on experience, that the scientific method could guarantee social change. More important still, the loss of the lovely assurance that history has a “meaning” that, even if in roundabout ways, will lead humanity to a glorious future. And finally, the nagging doubt that all these prescriptive utopias may not be practical or even desirable. And the activists who try to revive them, without themselves really believing in them, are chasing after wind.

But look at the right too: what has happened to the traditional institutions and values that only a few decades ago were seen as the indispensable pillars of order and civilization? The nation, patriotism, the apostolic and Catholic Church, military service, bourgeois culture, patriarchy,² Sunday lamb dinner with the family? They have melted like icebergs exposed to global warming and it is clearly not our thumbing our noses at them, as we felt compelled to do as adolescents, that is making things worse. These notions were already moribund then; in fact, today they are among those species considered “extinct in the wild.” Now you have to go to the zoo to see them.

As for the center, what is left of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” with its social security, guaranteed

2 There are still people valiantly fighting patriarchy, but I ask you this: where are the patriarchs? If Freud’s theory, according to which the authoritarian father is to the individual what institutions are to the social order, were true, then anarchy would have reigned for some time now! But, as one might note, the evaporation of the severe Father has not made way for fraternity, far from it. There are those calling for his return so that he may finally be killed.

employment, increasing free time, democratic involvement, improved education and public health services, and retirement and funeral expenses guaranteed? All the elements of this lukewarm but certain comfort which were thought to be the norm, are now being swept away like empty champagne bottles after the all night party that was the golden years from 1945 to 1975. The gently sloping stairs that one gracefully ascended one after the other now opens into a huge hole. Some fall, some hang on. It's the nasty reality of competition.

Finally we look up into the air and find the intellectuals: "there are simulacra everywhere!"—post-modernism, post-history, post-humanism, post-critique, anything so long as it is "post" and now even post-post. Of course, this form of elegant resignation makes us smile ("we have nothing left to hope for but a university post") but it points to a widely held state of mind, the sense that nothing is moving forward, that all the hands have been played, the future is past, and struggle is impossible. If it weren't the extreme right, the Islamists, the homophobes and the smokers—that is to say, all those who pretend to embody the past—one wonders what could still provoke public rage today. Such an absence of hope is not so much despair since there is an energy in despair; nor is it inertia: on the contrary, everything must "move" faster and faster. It is manic-depressive nihilism.

The difference between ancient society, modernism, and post-modernism is this: the ancients knew that they believed, the modernists believed that they knew, and the post-modernists

believe that they don't believe in anything anymore. It is precisely this latter belief that we have to destroy. What we need to criticize in the disabused pose of those who have walked away from everything without having been anywhere is not their giving up of illusions, but that all the illusions they encourage about the world they describe as rational are in fact filled with spells, magical rituals and sacred carrots. For if the ancient idols have been thrown to the bonfire of the vanities, it is in the name of a monotheism so much more voracious that it remains the only social force. If it is not seen, it is because it is everywhere, and so it presents itself as the only truth, naked and undeniable. Everything has been deconstructed, demystified, demolished, discredited, superseded, decomposed, cut in slices, digested, defecated. Everything? No. Nobody touches the market. It's taboo. It proliferates like algae that take over all the space around it, eliminating other species. It is the religion of *World Trade, Inc.* Yet just as Christianity did not completely eliminate the pagan gods, but integrated them into its universe in the bastardized forms of the Virgin Mary and the saints, the monotheism of the market has not completely destroyed the human motives that were once outside of it. It has monopolized them—in denaturing them, in reforming them so that they conform to its ends—to the point of making them unrecognizable. To believe that motivation is lacking in this world is to misunderstand the mutant forms through which it expresses itself.

Is it necessary to clarify that it is not a question here of making a cynical apology for a social system in which the

norm is a pathetic and feeble vegetative state? The absence of a taste for life, the smothering of passions, is only the flipside of the total mobilization required by World Trade, Inc., and is its symptom. You don't treat bulimia with anorexia! No, the objective of practicing demotivation, and this treatise is a modest step in that direction, would be rather to divest oneself from the apparatuses used to lead all of us donkeys to the market, to methodically dismantle the mechanisms that ensure that, despite everything, *it works*.

Some might say: that's not enough, you have to give people reasons to fight, motivate them to seek a better world, offer them visions of well-being, of beauty, of justice. Not really. I do not hold the view that this is the role of critique. Self-limitation is required. If one opposes the way our energies are captured by the exterior force of the market, it is not in order to *prescribe* in turn behaviors and goals intended to be more desirable. We have already seen plenty of these utopias that ridicule the current carrots only in order to replace them with even more tyrannical ones. In a certain sense they all resemble the reigning directive in Thomas More's *Utopia*: "Everyone goes to bed at eight o'clock and sleeps for eight hours!"

Besides, the history of the 20th century has thoroughly demonstrated that the attempts to oppose World Trade, Inc. with *models* of behavior aimed to subvert it have in the end provided it with its best weapons. Today the managers want nothing less than to make every employee a situationist, enjoining them to be spontaneous, creative, autonomous, freewheeling, unattached,

and greeting the precariousness of their lives with open arms. Trying to outdo this would be absurd. On the other hand, limiting the critique to the domain of the negative, without prescribing a specific goal, is to show great optimism stemming from the hypotheses (obviously unproven) that most people have within them all the energy necessary for their autonomy without there being the need to add any. In his time Lichtenberg wrote, “Nothing is more unfathomable than the system of motivation behind our actions.” One can hope that this impenetrability can definitively restore its rights.