

Silencing Capitalism?⁶

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It is a crazy dream. A professional fantasy⁸. On a beautiful winter's morning, after a walk against a backdrop of icy blue skies, I reach the large Edgard Faure amphitheater at Dauphine. Here, two hundred students await the start of a new teaching based on an hour of shared silence!

A few days before, I explained the rules of the game. No laptops, no smartphones, no headphones, nothing to hold and nothing to do. No talking or trying to communicate. Sitting side by side, in the discomfort of immobility, each and every one must cohabit with his or her neighbors in this large, voiceless and aimless assembly.

At first, the discomfort is obvious. An hour of inactivity is a long time. Very long. Interminable. There are a few embarrassed laughs. Hands go off in search of that absent object usually so convenient to escape. Some sigh. Many are as bothered by the presence of the silent others as by the silence itself. For me too, stuck at the bottom of the amphitheater slope, everything is awkward. Stares watch for my reactions or avoid me. Sitting behind this desk, facing an unused microphone, I am a train at a standstill. Of all the people present that day, I am probably the most uncomfortable. Caught in the light, dispossessed of the verb, I am an authority laid bare.

Speech is often a mediation. But its suspension also shows the extent to which it serves to furnish and veil the world. We talk to avoid each other. To make background noise. Our expression is full of ready-made phrases, staged situations and commonplaces. In the silence, the curtain rises. We enter that “pre-reflexive” world so dear to phenomenologists. We touch on what lies beneath and before language. All living things are on the edge.

Twenty minutes into the session, some close their eyes. Others keep them wide open, to savour the strange atmosphere, or simply to be vigilant. Two people start crying, one in the middle of the auditorium, the other at the back. Everyone realizes something far beyond words. But what is it? It remains a mystery. Their mystery. For still others, the moment just becomes unbearable. They stand up, silently, to leave this painful experience as quickly as possible. In this solitude together, perhaps they felt they were in bad company. For the majority, boredom, impatience and numbness dominate.

Just a few more minutes. On the last few meters of this adventure, I finally wonder what is suspending the silence in this too-dark space. A system, perhaps? Capitalism has

remained at the door of this educational space. Its organization and management are entirely interrupted. New things must be chained together, systematized like irresistible successions. Waiting must become a torment. Over time, management has gone from an obsession with functions to an absolute determination to ensure the fluidity of our increasingly “customer experience”. Ford took over from Taylor. Platforms and AI have systematized the assembly line far beyond the shop floor. The fluidity of responses to our hands on the screen is the flip side of the cadences imposed by the conveyor belt.

You are watching a video on YouTube. Advertisements temporarily interrupt your viewing experience. Want to avoid them? No problem. You can upgrade from a “freemium” to a “premium” subscription, and you no longer suffer these interruptions. But removing this interval has a value. There is a price to pay. More broadly speaking, our screens have accustomed us to a continuous, flowing experience. New items follow one another so fluidly that they touch. Our digital browsing is a never-ending experience, as close to our desires as possible, guided by the very impulses of our fingers. Nothing can beat this space of attention. Especially not a university education with its necessarily dull rhythms.

Class ends. I get up and start walking towards the exit. But some of the students don't leave the lecture hall. They remain seated, prolonging the strange atmosphere of this learning without content. Instinctively, I climb a few steps and take a seat in one of the bays. I wait. Time no longer matters. I don't leave until the last square leaves this purposeless place.

Still reeling from the moment, I head for home. As I emerge from the metro station, my cell phone vibrates in my pocket. I realize I haven't touched it all the way home. The department manager wants to talk to me. “It's interesting what you've just done. I've got nothing against it. But imagine if everyone started doing that!”. I'd never thought about the question of “scaling up”. She's right. I reassure her. By the next class, everything will be back to normal. And I don't think this episode will cause much of a stir.

The next morning, I am at my desk for office hour. The Edgard Faure amphitheater is already far away. Everyday life has returned to normal. The director of my laboratory walks down the corridor. The door is ajar. She slips in for a brief chat. “It's not just your research that's weird! Are

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⁸ Possible philosophical sources of inspiration for this dream can be found in Mazis (2016), de Vaujany (2022), de Vaujany and Introna (2023), or Pérezts et al. (2024).

your classes getting weird too? She's right. Perhaps it's all a bit too far from the mark. I try, more or less skillfully, to drown the fish by going back to a story about offices and moving...

Evidently, news of this experience has begun to circulate.

I go downstairs for a coffee. In the stairwell, I bump into our president. On seeing me, he stops dead in his tracks. "Are you serving us empty sets? He's heard about the course. He's also worried about the possibility of things getting out of hand. I reassure him.

Back at my computer, the conversation makes me brood. As I sip my cold coffee, I wonder if I've experimented too much. I don't go out for lunch. No longer in the mood. The following events don't appease me.

The afternoon is devoted to a team seminar. In her introduction, the moderator stresses the importance of exploring the political consequences of management. I couldn't agree more. However, part of the speech seems directly addressed to me: "But revolt certainly doesn't mean silence. On the contrary, silence often has to be broken". That's a good point. I hadn't anticipated this possible ambiguity in my approach. In the reflexive world, silences are bound to make sense. They can be the invisibilization of a tragedy.

The seminar over, I return to my office. The routine of e-mails and writing refocuses me. For a few hours, I'm back in my ordinary life. I've lost track of time.

Already 6.30pm! Time to leave. As I'm moving towards the door, my telephone rings. I look at the number. I hesitate a little, then pick it up. It's the President's office. The director tells me that the rector wants to speak to me! He's on the line. I wait, stunned.

"Hello, you've gone far!

He comes back to the story he's obviously heard about. I nod obediently, incredulous.

"This is not the best time to be pushing this kind of experiment! More than ever, academics are expected to be exemplary and efficient."

I pause. What can I say?

"You know we talked about you this morning at the château?"

"You mean, the..."

"Yes, him!"

I'm speechless.

"He clearly told the Minister that the academic world had to remain a place where people could speak out, and speak out effectively. It's out of the question to pay professors to say nothing, and encourage them to do nothing!"

Clearly, my approach has not helped to improve the image of academics and researchers. I apologize profusely. The unpleasant conversation ends after a few minutes.

Haggard, I wonder what the next step will be. A mention in an angry tweet from Elon Musk? A spike in a papal homily? A demonstration by a citizens' collective? The headlines on the evening news? I'm running out the door as fast as I can.

How could I have been so wrong? For me, the emptiness of management was far more problematic than the fullness of silence. For me, the university had to be the temple of rebellious speech, but also of silence. Not just in libraries. But also that of serene dialogue. The silence of reflection and sometimes solitary writing. The silence of embodied doubt. The punctuation of discourse. Without silences, rhythms and pauses, no meaning is possible. In a world of constant noise, this withdrawal, this non-immediate discourse of the academic, is essential. This possibility of not reacting immediately to the flow of current events is precisely the place for deep reflection. Or so I thought.

I was wrong.

The following week, I published my *mea culpa* on social networks. I was "overworked" and "tired". This excess will never happen again. I agreed to do a "compensation" course with the same audience. The teaching will be based on an in-depth PowerPoint, a well-paced, well-thought-out teaching sequence, and multiple online supplements. Phew! Everything's back on track. Things are finally winding down.

Fortunately, this daring moment is just a dream. As of Monday, I'll be able to resume my part in the great symphony of the world.

PS: while the roles and functions mentioned in this post are real, the people embodying them are totally imaginary. They are the product of free writing and a desire for a Kafkaesque atmosphere.

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