



NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

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28. Five Questions whilst Walking: For Those that Decided to Participate in *Agir Pour le Vivant*

Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan

This chapter republishes an intervention to clarify our choice to ask participants to desert a big festival of ideas, *Agir Pour le Vivant* (Action for the Living), that took place in Arles in France in August 2020. We felt that the festival's intention of 'action for the living' was dissonant with the event's sponsorship by a series of toxic corporations. Our demand precipitated a series of public responses, ending with this final letter by us that asked a series of questions, our intention being to foreground the sorts of difficult choices that need to be made if we are collectively to walk away from the forces propelling global ecological crisis.

I Am a Boycotter

I am a boycotter. I am and always have been for some worlds and not others.

If ever there were a time for life-affirming anti-capitalism it is NOW (Donna Haraway).¹

This chapter republishes an intervention to clarify our choice to ask participants to boycott an event, *Agir Pour le Vivant* (Action for the

1 Personal correspondence between Donna Haraway, Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, August 2020, quoted with permission.

Living) that took place in Arles in France in August 2020. The event's description and intention were advertised as follows:

A large festival open to all and rooted in its territory, AGIR POUR LE VIVANT creates a new space for reflection and discussion beyond ideologies. For a week, it combines approaches, crosses the skills and proposals of writers, philosophers, scientists, gardeners, botanists, agronomists, herbalists, entrepreneurs and environmental activists who are trying to renew the great history of man's relationship with nature. They redefine the place of rivers in the world; claim royalty-free and reproducible organic seeds; campaign for the recognition of herbalism, for social and climatic justice or for a decolonial ecology; imagine resaving humanity; support the transition of companies, territories...²

We felt this statement to be dissonant with the event's sponsorship by a series of toxic corporations and financiers. Our open letter demanding people not to participate was published in *terrestres.org* as 'Choosing which Culture to Feed: An Open Letter about Friendships and a Call to Desert'³ (Fremaux and Jordan 2020). It became something of a *cause célèbre*, being shared widely on social media and precipitating further published letters between ourselves and participants who decided to attend the event but managed to eject one of the funders (for example, Fremaux and Jordan 2020; Morizot and Zhong Mengual 2020). We share here the final letter of the exchange that poses a series of questions to foreground the sorts of difficult choices that need to be made if we are collectively to walk away from the forces propelling the global ecological crisis.

Question 1: What about the Forest?

I'm lost in a forest
 All alone
 The girl was never there
 It's always the same
 I'm running towards nothing
 (Again and again and again and again)⁴

2 <https://www.agirpourlevivant.fr/copie-de-programme-2>.

3 An English version is here: <https://www.terrestres.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Choosing-which-culture-to-feed.pdf>.

4 The Cure, 'A forest' (1980), ppm 337.

Let us begin with celebration and joy. Joy that words have led to action as they always should. The action being that one of the sponsors of *Agir Pour le Vivant* has had to retreat and has thus liberated the forum from one of its toxic ties. BNP Paribas's logo has been taken off the website and its money will be returned. "We would like to thank them here for their commitment to the living", says the forum's page, covered in logos.

BNP Paribas's "commitment to the living" would have cost them 20,000 euros—a little under 10% of the 270,000 total budget of the festival we learn from the article in the Arlesian local paper about this controversy (L'Arlesienne 2020). For a company whose 2019 revenue was 44.6 billion euros, and profits 8.17 billion, their support is a drop in the ocean, but their retreat is significant. What is just as significant to us is that their staff will not be present at the forum, nor speaking at the public events, nor in the closed-door workshops such as "L'empreinte naturelle des entreprises" ("The natural imprint of companies"), where they would have met with the other staff and CEOs of corporations for what is called an 'atelier de travail'⁵ (a 'working work-shop'). Of course, this event does not appear on the website's programme, and is not accessible to the public, even to those who have payed fifty euros for their special access pass, but it is perhaps the place where the real *work* of the greenwashers takes place and the false suicidal solutions to this omniscient crisis are dreamt up and planned.

Nonetheless, this is an historic victory. It joins the growing list of cultural institutions that have liberated themselves from the funders and drivers of this culture of extinction over the last few years. In the UK alone both the Tate Museum and the Royal Shakespeare Company have freed themselves from British Petroleum's sponsorship, London's Science Museum, National Theatre and National Gallery have ended their relationship with Shell, the Edinburgh Science Festival has severed ties with ExxonMobil and Total. In the Netherlands, the Dutch art museum the Mauritshuis, the science and culture museum Museum, and—close to the heart of Arlesians—Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum, will no longer accept Shell's sponsorship money.

5 See [https://www.eterritoire.fr/detail/activites-touristiques/agir-pour-le-vivant-jour-3/666132924/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur,bouches-du-rhone,arles\(13200\)](https://www.eterritoire.fr/detail/activites-touristiques/agir-pour-le-vivant-jour-3/666132924/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur,bouches-du-rhone,arles(13200)).

Of course, none of these institutions did this voluntarily. They changed their behaviour and let go of their sponsors because of uncomfortable words written to them, and most importantly because people acted on their ideas and put their vulnerable bodies on the line, often with stunningly beautiful performative protests⁶ and creative disruptions. Many of these disobedient bodies belonged to artists, intellectuals and researchers who, by entering into conflict with these institutions, were biting the hand that fed them. But they had decided that their individual cultural capital was less important than being part of a culture of resistance against those who, as Donna Haraway writes, “greenwash the exterminators”.⁷

The other thing that brings us joy is that some participants have chosen to desert, to walk away, including AfroEuropean anthropologist Dénètem Touam Bona and landscape architect Giles Clément. We say joy in contrast to the neoliberal duty of happiness, because as Silvia Federici says, joy is

not satisfaction with things as they are. It's part of feeling power's capacities growing in you and growing in the people around you. It's a feeling, a passion, that comes from a process of transformation [...] You feel that you have the power to change and you feel yourself changing with what you're doing, together with other people. It's not a form of acquiescence to what exists (Federici et al. 2017).

For us this feeling of power to change our lives and circumstances is at the core of collective resistance and the construction of forms of culture and life that affirm the living.

One of the other conditions that Baptiste Morizot, Estelle Zhong Mengual and their friends (including Rob Hopkins, Cyril Dion and Vinciane Dépres), set to the organisers of the festival in their open letter —*Quel trouble voulons-nous habiter?* (*Which Trouble do we Want to Inhabit?*) (Morizot and Zhong Mengual 2020)—was that all the corporate logos must be taken off communications. We are writing this nearly a week later, and not only are the other logos still on the website, but there are now thirty-three of them, as opposed to the twenty-six that were visible

6 See, for example, <https://www.liberatetate.org.uk/> and <https://www.fossilfreeculture.nl/>.

7 Personal correspondence between Isabelle Fremeaux, John Jordan and Donna Haraway, 13 August 2020, quoted with permission.

when we wrote the first letter. What is surprising and somewhat absurd is that it seems as though as one bank left another one came in, not even through the back door, but right on the front page of the forum's website. Amongst these new additions is the logo of *Crédit du Nord*, which is entirely owned by *Société Générale*, by far the biggest funders of North American shale gas. Since the signing of the UNFCCC COP21 Paris Agreement in December 2015 they have pumped over 11 billion euros into this death-dealing industry (Chocron and Wakim 2020). What is the difference between *Société Générale* and *BNP Paribas* ("The bank for a changing world"⁸)? (also see chapters by Wright and Nyberg, and Bracking, this volume).

We do not want to bore anyone with another cartography of poisonous sponsors. But to change something you need to know the texture of that thing. For us, this means being attuned and deeply sensitive to the specific details of situations and particular relationships in which we are enmeshed. The philosopher Spinoza, who we must never forget was despised by most of his contemporaries, taught us that such situated understanding enables us to move along in accordance with what is required in that moment. Surely this is the key to ethics. We are not interested in those old forms of rigid radicalism which try to control things, but in response-ability, in building our capacities to remain responsive to specific changing situations and opening up common spaces that support, rather than control, mutual transformation. The key is surely that we feel more alive together.

And we certainly do not feel such joy when we see that all the other corporations remain and three of the new logos include *Faber and Novel*, a talent and technology company whose clients include *Total*.⁹ *Fondation Yves Rocher*, who expose low-paid workers to pesticides and recently sacked 132 Turkish women workers because they joined a union (Billette 2019). And last but not least, the great polluters of public space and our imaginaries, dealers of the dangerous drug of endless consumption, the world's largest outdoor advertising corporation, *JC Decaux*.

Was the felling of *BNP Paribas* the tree that is hiding the forest?

8 <https://group.bnpparibas/en/>.

9 <https://www.fabernovel.com/fr/clients/cases>.

Question 2: Is It Just about Fossil Fuels?

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! (Greta Thunberg speaking at the *UN Climate Action Summit in New York City*, September 2019).

We disagree with the assertion in *Quel trouble voulons-nous habiter?* that “after analysis, the other sponsors do not seem to have the same degree of seriousness at all” (Morizot and Zhong Mengual 2020). Does this suggest that, by removing the most obvious ‘exterminators’, it is OK for you to keep cooperating with the others by attending the forum? Is the designing of airports and supermarkets and the creation of new financial markets in water, air, soil and forests—and thus the effective privatisation of nature—really less serious? Is this not about wielding the great magical rootless tool of the new spirit of ‘green’ capitalism: offsetting?

We have been involved in the climate justice movement for a quarter of a century. When we were setting up climate camps over a decade ago (Fremaux and Jordan 2011), merging the yes and the no, entangling the creation of alternatives with resistance, demonstrating forms of non-hierarchical ecological life, and simultaneously taking action against airport expansion and coal-fired power stations, we still had to convince people that climate change existed: ‘keep the oil in the soil’ was seen as a radical statement. Now such words are commonly heard in board rooms and chanted by the biggest youth movement in world history on our streets, calling for “system change not climate change”. We can only celebrate the fact that fossil fuel corporations and their funders are rapidly losing their social acceptance and a fossil fuel-free future is no longer just the dream of rebels. But there is a blind spot. When those in power talk of ‘anthropogenic’ climate it would be infinitely more accurate to refer to it as capitalist climate change (Tanuro 2014). As one of the beautiful pink and green banners at climate camp proclaimed, “capitalism is crisis”.

Whether capitalism comes in red, pink or green, it is its cancer-like logic of limitless growth that is at the heart of the problem. In *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, which brilliantly

details how the economy is at war against life, Naomi Klein (2015: 21) wrote “[w]hat the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered growth”. This contradictory, suicidal logic of capitalism, a legacy of colonialism, patriarchy and dispossession, cannot be smoothed over by words that demand us to “inhabit incoherence”. This contradiction is rendering this world uninhabitable.

Scientists everywhere tell us there are limits and key planetary boundaries that must be respected to avoid triggering collapse, but we should no longer fear, because a new panacea has been found, namely, ‘green growth’. This buzz word is now the core tenet of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and since 2012 has been promoted by institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD. The goal is to achieve “absolute decoupling” of GDP from the total use of natural resources. The trouble is that three recent empirical studies (Hickel 2018) (including one by cheerleaders of green growth, the UN Environment Programme), show that this seemingly elegant solution to the catastrophe is a pipe dream. Even under the best conditions—including state-of-the-art, government-supported technological innovation to develop absolute energy efficiency, massive taxation raising the price of carbon from \$50 to \$600 per metric tonne, and taxing resource extraction—every computer model of the figures pushed us way over the planetary limits. As Sian Sullivan (2013) writes:

[t]he utopian vision here is that capitalism will thus become better aligned with ‘nature’, so as to generate the multiple wins of a ‘green economy’ wherein economic growth is maintained and ‘natural capital’ is too.

In the new documentary, *Fairytales of Growth*, sixteen-year-old Tokatawin Iron Eyes, President of Standing Rock Youth Council, looks into the camera.¹⁰ Her life-giving land is threatened by the Dakota Access Pipeline, initially funded in part by international financial services firm Natixis, owners of Mirova, the sponsors whose ‘#naturalcapital’ belief system could not be further from her world and her community of “water defenders” who risked everything to keep life flourishing on their land (Earthjustice 2020). The belief that humans will only

¹⁰ <https://www.fairytalesofgrowth.com>.

protect nature if it is measured, valued and becomes integrated into a profit-making market accounting system, could not be further from her life-affirming culture, where people did *“did not own land individually, but instead believed in the importance of honoring the earth as our common home and sharing its resources responsibly”* (Ignatian Solidarity Network 2019). “One of the biggest things that anybody can learn from this youth climate movement right now, being built on the work of indigenous, black and brown communities is the fact that it is an issue of priorities”, she gesticulates with calm rage, “[b]ecause when we want to talk about economic growth over people having clean water and the right to a livable future and planet that is a sign that something is wrong”.

Question 3: Who Is Contaminating Who?

Friendship will be the soil from which a new politics will emerge (Ivan Illich n.d., quoted in bergman and Montgomery 2017: online).

The mechanism to gain social licence to operate in an event such as *Agir pour le Vivant* seems not to have been understood. It is neither a question of an indirect contact with an economic actor being turned into a sort of recruitment operation, nor of participants becoming spokes-people despite themselves being ‘contaminated’ and losing their critical intelligence and lucidity. What we are pointing to is actually the reverse: it is your critical intelligence, your dazzling analyses, your innovative proposals that positively spill over on to them. Simply by association, they repair their often shaky reputation.

The very notion of social licence to operate is not an activist concept, infused with ‘ideological’ or ‘theological unconscious’: it was born in corporate offices. For instance, Henderson and Williams (respectively Shell’s Project Director for External Affairs, and Chair of corporate PR firm Fishburn Hedges) described it thus when they were in charge of “a global reputation management programme to ‘build, maintain and defend Shell’s capital’”, after the Brent Spar debacle:¹¹ “[i]t is opinion formers that grant the licence to operate and often set the tone for how

11 In which in the mid-1990s Shell controversially proposed to decommission the Brent Spar oil rig in the North Sea by simply sinking the platform into deep water in the North Atlantic, causing an outcry amongst environmental campaigners, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brent_Spar.

the general public hears about and assesses companies" (Henderson and Williams 2002: 12, quoted in Evans 2015: 79). Putting their strategy into action, Shell went on to sponsor a large number of cultural institutions and high-profile cultural events in the fifteen years that ensued.

Allowing ourselves an analogy with COVID-19, the problem is not becoming representatives of the virus but finding oneself aiding its spread. We need to stop the infection of all corners of life with capitalist logic. What is being called for here is some 'social distancing', so as to not unwittingly become 'spreaders', even if one can feel proud of being asymptomatic.

Question 4: Which Friendships Are Fertile for Whom?

It was never for us a question of issuing an *ultimatum* about friendship, a sort of emotional blackmail. To imagine that such a thing could be a real political lever would have been rather presumptuous. For us, friendship is not the neoliberal "banal affair of private preferences [...] with those who are already like us, [with whom] we keep each other comfortable, rather than becoming different and more capable together", as bergman and Montgomery (2017: 96) sum up so sharply: friendship is a "relationship crucial to life, worth fighting for".

That said, we do not subscribe to the Bush-like logic that seems to be attributed to us—"you are either with us or against us"—because we are not confused as to whom the real enemies are. The aim of our call to desert the event was *not* to sort out friends from foes, allies from traitors; it was to defuse the nefarious organisations' strategy of gaining a social licence to operate.

As Dénètem Touam Bona, the first deserter, underlined to us in his reading of *Which Trouble Do we Want to Inhabit?* (Morizot and Zhong Mengual 2020),

[t]here is an assumption here that 'attachments', bonds are good in themselves, and that out of their proliferation, salvation will inevitably be born. As far as I am concerned, my conception of the lyannaj [coalition] cannot be dissociated from what I call 'maroon secession'. The maroonage that I conceive of as 'running away', as forms of life and resistance in a minor mode, is an operation of subtraction, similar to that La Boétie already praised in his *Discourse on voluntary servitude*, or to that Foucault evoked when he linked becoming-fascist with falling

in love with power (and recognition, prestige, honours... are part of the attributes of power) (Personal communication).

In the end, we are actually in complete agreement with Donna Haraway who wrote to us about the call out and its response:

I am a boycotter. I am and always have been for some worlds and not others. If ever there were a time for life-affirming anti-capitalism it is NOW [...] I also affirm the ongoing possibility of future alliances with people who did not boycott, and who disagree, but not on just any terms. Coming together is always finite, fragile, open to change. It is not easy not to demonize after fierce disagreement, but it is crucial. But sympoiesis is not a grand neoliberal festival of co-becoming (Personal communication, 13 August 2020).

Question 5: What Are We Capable of?

First of all, to clarify, as it is one of several reversals of our arguments: we did not ask for coherence from our addressees. We explained that what has often motivated our numerous non-collaboration decisions was a need for coherence. Not to alleviate guilt, but as care for mental health (which has little to do with ‘psychological comfort’). George Orwell, who knew what it meant to embody words and ideas and was prepared to die for them on the anti-fascist front of the 1936 Spanish Revolution, coined the term “doublethink”, in his dystopian novel *1984* (1949). An imposed practice at the heart of maintaining a totalitarian regime founded on inequality, ‘doublethink’ was “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them” (Orwell 1949: 244; also see Sullivan’s Chapter 11, this volume). For Orwell, with ‘doublethink’ came the mental state necessary to make sure a society of equality could never be put in place: he called this managed authoritarian deferral, “controlled insanity.”

There is no doubt that the moralistic hunt for daily incoherences is absurd at best, most often noxious. We certainly also strive for a world where contradictions can be “melting pots and sources of creative tensions”: yet, and as Dénètem Touam Bona also remarks, “[t]he praise of trouble must not serve the nihilistic mechanics of general equivalence of capital” (personal communication); it cannot be a handless concept, as Baptiste Morizot would say.

It is indeed crucial and urgent to embrace ‘an art of consequences’: we are not calling for much more. And maybe the question at the core of such an art would no longer be ‘what should one do?’ but ‘what is one capable of?’

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