

Intro to Châtelet



Among the French intellectuals of the 20th century who are still consequential for our time, Gilles Châtelet is yet to receive his deserved spotlight in the English-speaking world. The highly anticipated publication of **To Live and Think Like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies** will likely end his obscurity and serve as a corrective.¹ Trained in pure mathematics, Châtelet is known in scientific fields as wide ranging as biology, physics, and cognitive sciences for his work on the foundational role of non-discrete mathematics in the evolutionary formation of cognition, and also for conceptualizing geometry as a mediating force within the interlocking movements of life, thought, and language.² However, his active social and political life puts his great mind in a different social body than most acclaimed mathematicians. During the upheavals of the 1960s, Châtelet maintained his membership in the French Communist Party and later associated with the *Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire* (FHAR). In 1979, he obtained his PhD and became a professor of mathematics at the University of Paris VIII, and in 1994 he joined the Laboratory of Scientific Thought at the École Normale Supérieure–Paris, where he taught an influential seminar called “Action, Potentiality and Virtuality” until his suicide in 1999.

Alongside his life as a scientist and an intellectual, Châtelet lived another as an unchaste party animal and, according to friends, was a fixture at La Palace, Paris’ response to New York’s Studio 54 and the allegorical setting of the book’s first chapter.

Châtelet’s depiction of the night club as the birthplace of the French neoliberal Counter-Reformation movement, the scene, as it were, of the cyclonic fraternization of “Money, Fashion, the Street, the Media, and even the University” in the formation of a “tertiary service society” consisting of capital, state, and cybernetics, speaks directly to our contemporary situation, in which governments, Google, and Goldman Sachs are increasingly indistinguishable.³

This is perhaps why the reference to pigs in the title is more than just an exercise in poetic anthropomorphism for describing what Châtelet’s calls “the gluttony of the formal urban middle class”; it also has to do with his views on cybernetic capitalist statism as a project for the full domestication of humanity. The book’s

narrative, if it contains such a thing, consists in how the theoretical shift from a Marxist prioritization of production to a Deleuzian ontology of chaos has been accompanied by a political shift from social democracy to neoliberalism as well as by an economic transformation from industrialization to post-Fordism.

At 171 pages, **To Live and Think Like Pigs** is a small volume, but Châtelet manages to condense several observations about the inseparability media technologies, politics, and the economy, none of which have been attempted so clearly since Deleuze signaled the decline of the Foucauldian disciplinary paradigm in his “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”⁴ A more historical way of entering into the book would be via Herbert Marcuse’s **One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society**.⁵ Châtelet’s admiration for the German philosopher is evident not only in the obituary he wrote for *Le Monde diplomatique* on the occasion of Marcuse’s death in 1998 (“Read Marcuse Again to Not Live Like Pigs”), but also in the subtitle of the present volume, which bears an underlying resemblance, or at least pays an homage, to the subtitle of Marcuse’s study.⁶

These affinities, however, should in no way cast doubt on Châtelet’s originality in dealing with a number of crucial questions. For instance, his contribution to the problem of individuation in **To Live and Think Like Pigs** consists in moving it away from emphasizing the industrial or systemic production of the individual subject, as we see respectively in Marcuse and Deleuze, so as to focus on the indirect shaping of the attitudes and behaviors of intersubjective collectives. For him, what may appear as the open, indeterminate, and emergent chaos of sociopolitical life in the 1990s might result in something worse than the tyranny of our current postindustrial information societies. He makes it explicit that cybernetic capitalism, rather than being a form of hyper-alienation from the natural order, must be viewed as a radical liquefying of all history along with its resulting social order back into the natural world.

Châtelet’s careful consideration of philosopher Thomas Hobbes establishes a new prehistory for our contemporary epistopolitical order by linking the affinities of postmodernism and the first order of cybernetics with this pre-enlightenment past. For him, the seeds of our statistical technologized society were sown centuries ago, through Hobbes’ fiction of the organicity of monarchical rule and the sovereign’s roots in the natural order, to which neoliberalism hopes to return the political order.

Closer to the end of the book, however, Châtelet’s mostly grim characterization of our time reveals its hopeful core and shows how it is only from the substrate of this new technological wilderness that a new kind of humanity, a new civilization, can arise. “What if,” he asks, “the cybercattle were to become a people once more, with its songs and its hearty appetites, a giant vibrating membrane, a pulp-humanity from which all flesh would unfold?”⁷

1 Gilles Châtelet, **To Live and Think Like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies**, trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth and New York: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2014).

2 In addition to his published journal articles, Châtelet’s philosophical contributions are packed into a book from 1993 titled **Les enjeux du mobile: Mathématique, physique philosophie**. Urgently in need of a proper retranslation, this volume was originally published in English as **Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics**, trans. Robert Shore and Muriel Zaghera (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

3 Châtelet, p. 2.

4 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” **October** 59 (Winter 1992).

5 Herbert Marcuse, **One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society** (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

6 See <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1998/08/CHATELET/3963>

7 Châtelet, p. 157.

