

The only question that matters has always been: What is the parasite? Well?!

liberated
The theoretical authority on parasitism is, of course, Michel Serres. His groundbreaking book isn't about *the* parasite that is the focus of P.S. Serres is interested in the entity and concept of the parasite.

which?
Despite the differences, it is almost uncanny how much this book of theory seems to explain, or at least resonate with, the entity and site that concerns P.S.

Throughout the text, Serres offers a series of playful textual analyses revolving around the concept of "parasite." Parasites offer a model for thinking about social and technological mediation. There are three kinds of parasites that Serres suggests: a biological parasite, a social parasite, and static (a connotation of the French word for "parasite" is "noise"). As translator Lawrence R. Schehr puts it, "The parasite is a microbe, an insidious infection that takes without giving and weakens without killing. The parasite is also a guest, who exchanges his talk, praise, and flattery for food." The parasite is noise as well, the static in a system or

→ what is this?

the interference in a channel. These seemingly dissimilar activities are, according to Michel Serres, not merely coincidentally expressed by the same word (in French). Rather, they are intrinsically related and, in fact, they have the same basic function in a system."

Serres' text constitutes "an epistemology of the parasite." As he declares: "In the beginning was the noise [or: the parasite]." Or, if you prefer, "Abuse appears before use." To put it reductively: even though the common view is that parasites are harmful, destructive, and supplementary, we should re-envision them as constructive, generative, and original. Yes, parasites abuse their hosts, in a sense. But Serres suggests that this view is limited, maybe even misleading. A parasite is not a low-level predator that seeks to destroy and consume its prey. The parasite eats next to (hence the prefix "para") its host. In one of his theoretical mic drops, Serres observes: "There is no system without parasites." Think of a biological parasite: this kind of parasite can affect the structure of an ecosystem by modifying the behavior of an infected

hah
true!

host, often in order to make transmission to other hosts more likely. In this sense, the parasite is bringing multiple bodies, entities, or individuals into a relationship with one another (a relationship that may not have existed without the parasite).

To summarize: No parasite, no system. But things become even more serious. We can add: No parasite, no change. As Serres puts it: "Systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning." Admittedly, this reads like a cryptic-sounding Buddhist koan. But it turns out there is a reason that non-functioning is key to functioning. In a perfectly functioning system, there would be no need for mediation. A channel of communication, or a transportation canal, without any mediation "disappears into immediacy." With total immediacy, "There would be no spaces of transformation anywhere." In other words, with total immediacy, there would be no room for change. Parasites invite adjustment, mutation, change.

change
of mediation

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The parasite (and the interruption that parasitical noise entails) transforms a system. Serres offers the following aphorism: "Theorem: noise gives rise to a new system, an order that is more complex than the simple chain. This parasite interrupts at first glance, consolidates when you look again." Parasitism is not about mere subsistence or survival. Admittedly, a tapeworm finds a host to survive; a social parasite comes to dinner in order to eat. But parasitism is not just about survival. It is also a form of power, because the capacity to drive change and consolidation are prerequisites of power.

The important point to move forward into the thinking about *the parasite* that P.S. discovered is the following:

When I think of parasites, they are tiny things: some bacteria, flukes, tapeworms, other gross flora and fauna. But Serres gives us parasitism as something more than an organism. It is a logic. On a mass scale, the parasite introduces a new way of thinking. All acts of exchange are

example

founded on exploitation. Instead of Marx's concept of "exchange value," Serres gives us "abuse value": "complete, irrevocable consummation" that is unidirectional. Abuse value "precedes use and exchange-value," because "exchange is always weighed, measured, calculated, taking into account a relation without exchange, an abusive relation."

So: abuse precedes exchange, but exchange is still part of the picture. Let us take the social parasite as an example: the guest who comes to dinner feeds off of a host at the feast. That parasite exchanges non-material talk for material food, information for physical goods, "his voice for matter." We are told repeatedly that alchemy does not work. The philosopher's stone is mere smoke and mirrors, correct? Well, this version of "parasite" (turning the immaterial into the material) sounds quite a bit like alchemy to me.