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Translated by Lawrence R. Schehr

Rats' Meals / Cascades

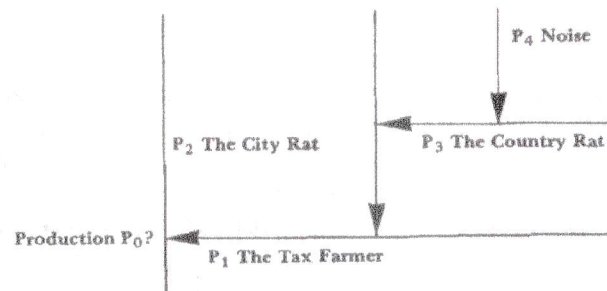
The city rat invites the country rat onto the Persian rug. They gnaw and chew leftover bits of ortolan. Scraps, bits and pieces, leftovers: their royal feast is only a meal after a meal among the dirty dishes of a table that has not been cleared. The city rat has produced nothing and his dinner invitation costs him almost nothing, Boursault says this in his *Fables d'Esoppe*, where the city rat lives in the house of a big tax farmer. Oil, butter, ham, bacon, cheese—everything is available. It is easy to invite the country cousin and regale oneself at the expense of another.

The tax farmer produced neither oil nor ham nor cheese; in fact, he produced nothing. But using the power of the law, he can profit from these products. Likewise for the city rat who takes the farmer's leftovers. And the last to profit is the country rat. But we know that the feast is cut short. The two companions scurry off when they hear a noise at the door. It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information. Was the noise really a message? Wasn't it, rather, static, a parasite? * A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order. Let's go to the country where we eat only soup, but quietly and without interruption.

The tax farmer is a parasite, living off the fat of the land: a royal feast, ortolans, Persian rugs. The first rat is a parasite: for him, leftovers, the same Persian rug. Nothing is missing, says La Fontaine. At the tables of the first, the table of the farmer, the second rat is a parasite. He permits himself to be entertained in such a fashion, never missing a bite. But strictly speaking, they all interrupt: the custom

* here Serres puns on the multiples meanings of the french word *parasite*. From the translator's preface: "In French, the word has three meanings: a biological parasite; a social parasite, and static. The English *parasite* corresponds only to the first two meanings in French. Thus the reader should always be aware of this additional resource in the French that is not translatable into English."

house officer makes life hard for the working man, the rat taxes the farmer, the guest exploits his host. But I can no longer write; the noise, the ultimate parasite, through it's interruption, wins the game. In the parasitic chain, the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor. The noise chases the country rat; the city rat remains, for he wants to finish the roast. A given parasite seeks to eject the parasite on the level immediately superior to his own. The following shows the cascade which collapses when $P_1 = P_4$.



I leave it to you to think about the loud noise: the sounds of the street which would makes the tax farmer give in; the creaking of the floorboards, the cracking of the beams, which would chase the rats from the building.

Let's draw up the balance. In the beginning is production: the oil crusher, the smokehouse, the cheese-maker's hut. Yet I would still like to know what *produce* means. Those who call production reproduction make the job easy. The world is full of copiers and repeaters, all highly rewarded with money and glory. It is better to interpret than to compose; it is better to have an opinion on a decision that has already been made than to make one's own. The modern illness is the engulfing of the new in the *duplicata*, the engulfing of intelligence in the pleasure [*jouissance*] of the homogeneous. Real production is undoubtedly rare, for it attracts parasites that immediately make it something common and banal. Real production is unexpected and improbable; it overflows with information and is always immediately parasited.

It attracts the farmer, whom I catch in the act of stealing (away). If he is a peasant, he raises cows and calves, pigs and poultry, living on butter and ham, eating at a table furnished with other foodstuffs; sometimes he sleeps in the barn, in the manure, among the livestock; he does not destroy non-renewable resources, like a vulgar industrialist, but lives off the newborn. Industry pillages and plunders. Such a farmer is part of a matrix. Is he a parasite? If he is a tax-collector (an interrupter), he takes part of the products of others for his own profit or for the profit

of the state to whom he respectfully defers. He is a veritable impostor.** His table abounds with cheeses, ham, bacon, butter, all produced by the first farmer. The situation repeats itself throughout history, for history has never lacked for political parasites. History is full of them, or maybe is made solely of them. Dinner is served among the parasites.

[...]

To parasite means to eat next to. Let us begin with this literal meaning. The country rat is invited by his colleague from town, who offers him supper. One would think that what is essential is their relation of resemblance or difference. But that is not enough; it never was. The relation of the guest is no longer simple. Giving or receiving, on the rug or on the tablecloth, goes through a black box. I don't know what happens there but it functions like an automatic corrector. There is no exchange, nor will there be one. Abuse appears before use. Gifted in some fashion, the one eating next to, soon eating at the expense of, always eats the same thing, the host, and this eternal host gives over and over, constantly till he breaks, even till death, drugged, enchanted, fascinated. The host is not prey, for he offers and continues to give. Not a prey, but the host. The other one is not a predator but a parasite. Would you say that a mother's breast is the child's prey? It is more or less the child's home. But this relation is of the simplest sort; there is none simpler or easier: it always goes in the same direction. The same one is the host: the same one takes and eats; there is no change of direction. This is true of all beings. Of lice and men.

** The word imposteur means both "tax collector" and "impostor."—Trans.

THE FLEA

(1633)

John Donne

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;
'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.