

In the Land of Logistics

by Gilles Paché

By analysing a generalised process of “logistisation”, Mathieu Quet shows that the circulation of people and goods is at the heart of our societies. But has logistics also captured language and the living world?

Reviewed: Mathieu Quet, *Flux. Comment la pensée logistique gouverne le monde*, Paris, La Découverte, 2022, 158 p., €16.

If the word “heterodox” is perfectly illustrated by certain academic works, this can certainly be said of this book by Mathieu Quet. The sociologist, who is known for his work on the pharmaceutical industry¹, here offers up an original contribution, one of the virtues of which is to produce a critical analysis of the “logistic fact”.

Logistics has “governed the world” for decades, he explains, by placing flows and circulation at the heart of globalised markets and, more widely, of societies engulfed in the forward march of neoliberalism. It is true that the Covid crisis brought logistical issues into the limelight, be they the supply of protective masks, the transfer by rail or by air of patients between overwhelmed hospitals, or lorry drivers who faced the risk of contamination as they continued to deliver to shops, click and collect stations and people’s homes.

Mathieu Quet does not ignore this reality, but his analysis goes much further and affirms, over the course of seven chapters, how necessary it is to go beyond a simple view of logistics as the transport of goods and people. Instead, we must think

¹ Mathieu Quet, *Impostures pharmaceutiques : médicaments illicites et luttes pour l’accès à la santé*, Paris, La Découverte, 2018.

about circulation and flows by taking a wide angle perspective (as a photographer might put it), a choice openly made by the author in order to present a broad panorama of facts and highlight unexpected perspectives.

Mathieu Quet launches a frontal attack against managerialism, but by asking good questions, and not being afraid of hitting a raw nerve: our dependence on logistical performance is clear, and, through a boomerang effect, the slightest friction in supply chains threatens to bring economic and social systems grinding to a halt, as demonstrated by the pandemic.

Wide Angle

Mathieu Quet offers a description of the emergence of a “world of flows”, outlining the main historical elements connected to the birth of the logistical approach. The reader will appreciate the author’s erudition on this topic, with well-supported references to its military foundations, fed into by operational research, the SCOOP project being emblematic of the connections between military and logistical imperatives (the SCOOP project played a central role during the airlift that was organised during the Berlin blockade in 1948-1949). Even if Mathieu Quet does not focus on the “engineerical” excesses that would arise out of this for decades, the reader senses that we are here once more being faced with the predominance of an optimising mode of thought which does away with any behavioural considerations.

In Chapter 3, the author focuses his analysis on the *management of flows*. At first, there are few surprises here: since the work done by Jacques Colin (who is strangely absent from the book), there has been a broad consensus to present logistics as a technology for controlling the physical *circulation* of flows of materials and goods². But when we take a closer look, we soon move into a more wide angle perspective, with reference to movements in all their variety – of goods, yes, but also of individuals (be they workers or homeless people), which leads us to types of mobility which must be managed as best as possible according to objectives of movement optimisation, leading us to “accelerate the speed of travel and intensify monitoring and regulatory operations” affecting flows (p. 71). Through numerous examples, Mathieu Quet

² Jacques Colin, “Du conteneur à la logistique : vers la dissolution des modes de transport ?”, *Culture Technique*, no. 19, 1989, p. 216-224.

reveals a process of “logistification of the world”, using for his own purposes the title of a book edited by Nathalie Fabbe-Costes and Aurélien Rouquet³.

The wide angle continues in Chapter 5, which deals with the supply crisis, based on failings in the effective organisation of flows, or even on situations of generalised breakdown (p. 108), be it in terms of the movement of products or of individuals. Mathieu Quet underlines the roots of this evil: the neoliberal order. “Something is rotten in the state of logistics,” he might say, and he would doubtless be partly right. The globalisation of markets and their avatars, global value chains, have paved the way for new productive and spatially fragmented architectures that can only exist when flows are perfectly controlled. As soon as the mechanism gets jammed, here comes the time of shortages, restrictions and supply delays. And, after 2021, who would doubt this?

Jack of All Trades, Master of None

Carried away by his enthusiasm, Mathieu Quet nevertheless opens up, in an “Everything is Logistics” (p. 47) harangue, some thought-provoking new territories. We will not dwell on human logistics, related to the management of migrations, which easily convinced us: after all, has the hub-and-spokes model not found privileged application in the transport by air of passengers, even if its origins are connected to the delivery of packages? Let us not dwell either on the logistics of living beings, when he refers to the moving of elephants from one nature reserve to another (p. 55), a movement which can patently be characterised as a flow.

However, semiotic logistics, which calls upon the idea of symbolic flows, in particular with reference to Félix Guattari and to his use of processes of *semiosis* (the development and processing of meaning)⁴, may plunge the reader into an abyss of perplexity. Doubtless such a “logistification of the sign” will need to be explored in more depth in order for the idea to be met with approval, and the same remark might be applied to emotional logistics, with a disconcerting approach to the “energetic flows that concern emotions” (p. 62).

³ Nathalie Fabbe-Costes and Aurélien Rouquet (ed.), *La logistisation du monde : chroniques sur une révolution en cours*, Aix-en-Provence, Presses universitaires de Provence, 2019.

⁴ Félix Guattari, *La Révolution moléculaire*, Paris, Recherches, 1977.

Likewise, the author leaves us somewhat perplexed when he brings in the tsetse fly to support his thesis (logistic thought governs the world). Said fly is referred to in Chapter 7 as a vehicle of serious diseases, the most famous of which is trypanosomiasis or sleeping sickness. With reference to the work of Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga⁵, Mathieu Quet notes that the spreading of trypanosomiasis by the tsetse fly can be assimilated to “a site of work and transformation”, to “a work that is in action in the activity of moving” (p. 143). Is the reader convinced, through this particular case, that logistic thought really governs the world?

A Critique of Managerialism

Mathieu Quet ends his inquiry with an appeal for an “alter-logistics”, in particular the formalisation of “alter-mobilities” (a reference to alter-globalisation approaches), and becomes convincing again when he announces his desire to “decolonise our trajectories”, including by using modes of transport that are condemned to obsolescence (p. 149).

In the book’s final arguments, we reencounter the intuitions of the much-missed Bernard David who, together with his friend Alain Arnaud, set out to “decolonise the logistical imagination”⁶. Issues connected to industrial relocation, which were at the heart of many debates during the Covid pandemic, but also the promotion of local distribution networks, which are less energy-intensive, occupy the space of the *disputatio* around a necessary “deglobalisation” and a return to the local.

More widely, this book interrogates the human cost of going “ever faster” and “ever further”, in particular by investigating the working conditions of the new *Lumpenproletariat* of logistics – which allows Mathieu Quet to bring the issue of struggles and conflicts back into the centre of his analysis, even if this implies defending an ambitious intellectual project: “It is the whole technocapitalist grammar of movement that grips our travel and our understanding of moving, travelling, which we must rout.” (p. 137).

⁵ Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, “Organic vehicles and passengers: the tsetse fly as transient analytical workspace”, *Transfers*, vol. 6, n° 2, 2016, pp. 74-93.

⁶ Bernard David and Alain Arnaud, “La logistique au défi de la décroissance volontaire”, in Nathalie Fabbe-Costes and Gilles Paché (ed.), *La logistique : une approche innovante des organisations*, Aix-en-Provence, Presses universitaires de Provence, 2013, pp. 205-215.

Some people will view such a project as dangerous, inasmuch as globalisation, supported by an ever more efficient logistics, has allowed millions of people to be taken out of poverty. Conversely, many observers will underline that our dependency on international supplies of raw materials, components and finished products, which we brutally rediscovered in 2020-2021, forces us to perform a genuine *aggiornamento* of the dominant logistical paradigm.

In fact, what Mathieu Quet is calling into question is the omnipotence of managerialism, and his book makes an excellent contribution to the aforementioned *disputatio*. His argument may seem excessive at times, but is it really? If we were to be deliberately provocative, we might even say that this point is useful for decision-makers, be they private or public, since it underlines the fragility of logistical structures that threaten the good functioning of commercial exchanges. Nothing worse, for demiurgic decision-makers, than imagining the limitless power of supply technologies to transform our world into a little village without any asperities.

The gaze of the sociologist, as had already been provided in his day by Jean-Pierre Durand in his analysis of the policy of “just-in-time production” and its impact on the management of work⁷, is more vital than ever. In this respect, Mathieu Quet’s book appears as essential reading, whether we admire or condemn the “logistic fact”.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, on 14 March 2022. Translated by Kate McNaughton, with the support of Cairn.info

⁷ Jean-Pierre Durand, *La chaîne invisible. Travailler aujourd’hui : flux tendu et servitude volontaire*, Paris, Seuil, 2004.