

13. Digital individuation and the occlusion of the protentional system

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Abstract

An anthropo-technological perspective (Sloterdijk) understands human technicity as inaugural and constitutive: human living beings are both psychophysically and behaviourally framed through technical praxes, that is prosthetic exteriorisations of their organic functions on extra-organic supports with shaping feedbacks on who performs them. Especially, Bernard Stiegler's approach enables us to understand how human temporality is technically structured through systems of exosomatic retentions organising our mnemonic processes, configuring the criteria devoted to select the experience and therefore to shape the systems of both collective and individual protentions, that is complexes of expectations, projections and shared hopes.

In my paper I would like to inquiry how within contemporary epoch we witness to a chronic and systemic political crisis of our retentional apparatuses, that is the institutions devoted to organise our projective system. Such a disease can be detected tanks to the analysis of limbic capitalism (Courtwright) investigating how our current socioeconomic system produces vicious protentional circuits within the subjects, programmatically acting on their exosomatic retentions in order to elicit addiction-based behaviours (G. Moore). This leads to the occlusion of our protentional system, increasingly adjusted on short-term goals, devoted to the immediate satisfaction of self-referential drives promoting their self-repetition. The result is a short-circuit of the limbic-motivational system (Claessens) at the bottom of human political agency, in so far as it is supposed to perform the subjects' identification with a collective, that is a system of reciprocal alert and availability to cooperate within a complex of shared concern and care.

I will aim to show how this incapacity of identifying oneself with modes of shared life and therefore projecting oneself in their production and organisation joins together three relevant contemporary political phenomena: on an individual scale, the raise of gambling addiction (Schüll) bears witness to the subjects' exigence to search in gambling for a reassuring restriction of their worldly environment of concerns and expectations; on a national scale, the appearing of identity politics based on ethno-geographic belonging reflects the populations' struggle to see themselves mirrored in macro-organisations and long-term projects; on a global scale, the phenomenon of climate porn thematises the feeling of impotence and indifference engendered before the obsessive provision of images and news about ecological disasters in distant regions. Hence, a politics for the future, that is a politics that will both be able to exist in the future and take care of the future from our present, should definitely provide an attentive reorganisation of our retentional apparatuses, rearranging the political dimension through new forms of participation, also passing through a ponderation of the stake represented by the implementation of digital technologies.

1. Anthropotechnology, or human originary technicity

Under the concept of anthropotechnology, following the insights of the contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (Sloterdijk 2009), I understand a theoretical perspective seeking to enquire into the relation between technics and the human lifeform, understanding this relation as originary and constitutive. This approach draws from contemporary philosophies of technology (Stiegler 2018b; Sloterdijk 2001; Latour 2005) and life sciences, especially evolutionary biology (Odling-Smee, Laland & Feldman 2003), palaeoanthropology (Sterelny 2012) and psychoanalysis (Winnicott 2012), aiming to set up a transdisciplinary research project. My goal is to benefit from a scientific, up-to-date set of knowledges and frame these findings within a critical, genealogical understanding of those organisms which acknowledge themselves as humans. According to this anthropotechnological perspective, I seek to investigate the originary technicity of human existence, showing how the relation between technics and the humans is constitutive, i.e., human lifeform could neither exist nor be conceived without consideration of the complex of technical practises producing, transmitting and surrounding it in every instance of its occurrence.

Humans are therefore physically, psychically, behaviourally as well as ecologically structured through technical practises, and this is the case regarding both their ontogeny, i.e., the individual life histories, and their phylogeny, i.e., the collective evolution of the species. Yet what is technics? By technics I mean both technologies, that is crafted artefacts, tools and devices, and techniques, that is apprehended skills and knowhows. Techniques and technologies always belong together, for every instrument may be utilized only thanks to particular rules of usage, and every tool may be produced only according to specific sets of knowledge (Leroi-Gourhan 1964; Leroi-Gourhan 1965). Tools are socially coded within a collective, and the humans belonging to that collective are able to adopt them through the generations only thanks to the transmission of the procedures and the norms which govern their usage. These set of knowledges, rituals and habits, in turn, may be transmitted only thanks to their inscription within artificial devices, so that cultures are understandable as technical apparatuses which, on the one hand, are produced and endured by a system of instruments; on the other, preserve and channel the knowledges needed to produce and transmit these instruments. From this viewpoint, technics always appears as entailment (Taylor 2010), i.e., a system of entrenched techniques and technologies related to a specific historical context and only working in their constant interrelation.

Thus, technics represents the exteriorization of life practises (Stiegler 2018b), the transfer of knowledges, capabilities and skills onto extrabodily supports, which are reorganized accordingly, in order to bestow determinate aspects of life to the non-living, this exteriorisation being both objectual and procedural, i.e., concerning both the organs and the functions these organs should accomplish (Gehlen 1950). Technical devices are

prosthetic, insofar as they replace organic functions and, in so doing, transform both these functions and their former supports (Alsberg 1975). Human ontogenetic development and phylogenetic evolution, indeed, are characterized by artificial selection of favoured traits (Moore 2017d): the cultural, that is artificial environments select for those organic features which better fit in their systems of tasks, duties and affordances (Gibson 1977), produced, in turn, by the process of exteriorization. The technical, artificial environments retroact on the organisms producing them and mould their constitution toward a closer match to their demands. Humans, therefore, do not only produce their cultural institutions, but are also extensively produced and shaped by them (Gehlen 1956). However, the adaptation to the artificial environments, normally, is not an exclusively passive process, for humans not only abide by their endogenous life conditions but are also able to actively shape and transform them, thanks to their very technical, that is constructed nature (Canguilhem 1966).

The process of technical exteriorization renders a lifeway transmissible, reproducible and modifiable regardless of the individual, biological organisms performing it, detachable from them and surviving their death. Its management is therefore bestowed to the collective, which should take care of its artificial organs, i.e., its exteriorized and collectivized life practises. Following the analyses of the contemporary French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (Stiegler 2013), human collectives should be understood organologically, i.e., considering as a whole, that is in their structural interrelation, the complex of biological organs composing the living organisms, the artificial organs, i.e., the technical media these organisms both produce and are produced by, and the social organizations, that is the systems of bio-cultural interrelations and interchanges where these organs (both biological and artificial) develop and transform.

Technics is more precisely conceivable if understood as the production of tertiary retentions (Stiegler 2018b), i.e., a third form of memory, inscribed into the non-living matter, which is therefore reorganized accordingly. Technics is a third form of memory in two instances: on the one hand, it composes human individual memory together with primary retentions, that is the perception of the flow of experience, and secondary retentions, that is the recollection of past lived instances (Husserl 2013). On the other, it articulates human collective memory together with the genetic heritage, i.e., the species-specific program inscribed in the genome, and neural memory, i.e., the individual experiences accumulating during everyone's life history. In both of these instances, technical, tertiary retentions enable the process of transmission of knowledges and operations peculiar to the human lifeform: technical inscriptions exceed the individual memory (they are managed by the collective) but also undergo intraspecific differentiation (each collective elaborates its own tertiary retentions).

Biological memory, both collective (genetic) and individual (neural), is influenced by technics, insofar as tertiary retentions select what shall be removed and what shall be retained, determining the reception of experience of both the collective and its individuals. It is important to stress that tertiary retentions always possess a collective, transindividual dimension (Simondon 2005), determining what matters for a community, its complex of concerns and care, its relation to the future. Moreover, it is relevant for what I aim to show to highlight that retentions are always also protentions, for expectations, projections and provisions are configured in relation to what has been retained from the past: according to the relevance, frequency and pervasiveness of lived and inherited experiences, we develop our relation to the future, that is our horizons of expectations and possibilities of confronting with what is going to happen. According to which types of experiences are inscribed as tertiary retentions, thus, the order and nature of our expectations may substantially change.

2. Contemporary capitalism and addicted behaviours

The anthropotechnical constitution of human existence undergoes progressive transformations according to the changes occurring within the technical apparatuses and to the ways these changes are adopted and integrated within the complex of the extant life conditions (Stiegler 2018b). Within contemporary, globalized societies the systems of tertiary retentions and the organological infrastructures devoted to their storage, elaboration and transmission undergo a systemic and chronic crisis, i.e., a disruption concerning every aspect of our lives and persisting continuously (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005), this crisis manifesting as the imposition of a new mode of existence, a new system of individuation and a new relation to time (Stiegler 2016). The ongoing disruption is therefore psychological, economical, environmental as well as political, and may be understood as crisis of capitalism, if the latter is conceived not only as an economic system but as the current, all-encompassing, globalized lifeway (Jason Moore 2017). Indeed, contemporary capitalism elicits economic disruptions, which in turn result into the environmental catastrophe represented by climate warming, the reduction of biodiversity and the breakdown of ecosystems (Pirani 2018), for big companies and national states rush to seize the last available resources of the alleged “natural” environment, conceived as standing reserve and “enframed” as indefinitely available supply (Heidegger 2000). This very same dynamic provokes existential and psycho-political diseases, for the individuals undergo stress and discomfort as both workers, consumers and political agents, this condition manifesting as the experience of a lack in meaning in life, as the loss of the capability of living and of the feeling of being part of a community (Crary 2013).

In what follows I aim to focus on the individual, existential dimension of this crisis, investigating how it essentially concerns the relation between the individuals and their collectives, i.e., their communities of belonging, highlighting how this relation is always

organologically mediated by the subjectivizing effects of technologies. However, the systemic, global dimension of this phenomenon should not be overlooked as it constitutes the background of these analyses. Indeed, the life practises the individuals adopt in order to cope with the distress and despair elicited by the current dismantling of the conditions of labour and political participation, seeking to reconstruct a seemingly meaningful and happy life, at the same time turn out to be damaging and deleterious for their social environments and biological ecosystems (Moore 2017b). This condition is well exemplified by the widespread tendency toward compulsive consumption, insofar as the quest for the temporary, anaesthetising pleasure of purchasing feeds the outsourced mass production of unnecessary commodities, which aliment, in turn, the exploitation of labour and ecologies (Haraway 2015). Moreover, the current socioeconomical situation prevents the individuals to develop their plasticity (Malabou 2007), i.e., to be able to proactively engage the ongoing crisis and react by reinventing novel knowhows and lifeways. Conversely, the individuals become unable to contribute in the production of their environments, while passively adapting to imposed conditions they cannot understand nor stand. This paradoxical, unbearable situation, a true short circuit between the collective dimension of the global market and the individual, localized life histories, is the expression of a vicious circle, where not only the individuals struggle to modify and cope with the globalized living system, but this system itself also imposes a narrative of sheer adaptation and resilience to change, playing as what is happening were unavoidable and necessary (Barbara Stiegler 2019).

The process of individuation, i.e., the organological structuring of consciences together with their biological and artificial organs and within their social organizations, is therefore compromised, and technical prostheses, that is tertiary retentions, play a pivotal role within this phenomenon. Indeed, the indiscriminate and acritical implementation of novel, disruptive technologies into the market combines with the decrease of the individual possibility of contributing to the configuration of these technologies and of the establishment of their rules of usage. It is important to state that the point is not about identifying technics as the problem and refute it as such, but rather about counteracting its passive imposition in order to develop a collaborative and contributory approach to technologies aiming at the production of novel lifeways and capabilities. We should acknowledge the pharmacological character of technics (Stiegler 2010), i.e., its being always both curative and poisonous for the process of individuation, and combat the global tendency toward proletarianization (Stiegler 2013), i.e., the progressive loss of knowledges and knowhows, up to the disappearing of the very feeling of existing.

Importantly, the current configuration of capitalism is not so much devoted to the production of goods and services as to the thematic and direct exploitation of the individual drives, the limbic reservoirs of psychic energies, considered as commodifiable resources (Courtwright 2005). In this sense, the market aims to produce ephemeral, yet easily reproducible pleasures, which render the individuals properly addicted, according

to the research perspective developed by Gerald Moore (Moore 2017a). Addictive behaviours, broadly understood, represent a good theoretical lens in order to understand the ongoing crisis of individuation: as the instance of gambling addiction clearly shows (Schüll 2012), people gamble neither because of the however remote chance of a big win nor to feel the thrill of the game—they do so in order to find relief from their everyday life and surrounding environments, perceived as essentially negative and oppressive, seeking retreat in an enclosed niche, where they feel to still have control over their lives and are able to let themselves lead astray from their anxieties and concerns. The addicts thus develop repetitive, stereotyped behavioural patterns, with scarce possibilities to evolve and compose with other habits, strengthening via their self-repetition. These lifeways tend to occupy all of their energy and time, while at the same time separating them from their social contexts and systems of relationships.

3. Digital individuation: stereotypy and fragmentation

I believe that digital technologies, as tertiary retentions, are a very telling instance of this phenomenon, that is the enlarged concept of addiction produced by contemporary capitalism (Alexander 2000). The digital encompasses every instance of our lives, from shopping to education and research, from security to insurances, from the news to social interactions. Furthermore, digital technologies are not limited to the internet as they also directly and massively contribute to the configuration of urban development, transportations, social infrastructures and industrial production, intertwining with the other technical systems, organizing and connecting them. Few, big companies own and control most of the digital business, and these platforms, largely outsourced and transnational, are extremely opaque and impervious in relation to the national protocols of regulation. Finally, the services they offer to third parties render them especially pervasive and indispensable as they develop and provide the infrastructures other companies and even national states need, being essential for the whole economy to subsist (Srnicek 2017).

From the perspective of the individual users, what is most relevant is the huge disproportion subsisting between the interfaces which are available to modification and interaction, on the one hand, and the hidden script, the system of algorithms regulating these interfaces, which is largely inaccessible and untraceable, on the other (Zuboff 2018). The almost completely passive attitude the individuals are forced to adopt toward their digital media and devices is exemplified by the phenomenon of datamining, i.e., the extraction and elaboration of data from the individuals' online (and increasingly also offline) activities in order to provide them with contents, offers and services. The algorithmic technologies of datamining bypass the dimension of the subject, which is fragmented into packs of data and subsequently reconstructed in terms of trends and statistics (Rouvroy & Berns 2013). The digital economy based on datamining seeks to render the individuals willing to spontaneously share their data in a process of extraction of their psychological interiority, a form of power which does not impose on the subjects but rather subliminally influence their behaviours, expropriating them from the private, incalculable dimension of their lives

and thus rendering them tame, willing to be controlled, predicted and administrated (Han 2014).

By enquiring into the process of datamining, we are able to gain an insight on the apparatuses (Agamben 2006) of control and exploitation at the bottom of the production of addicted subjectivities. On the one hand, contemporary, digital individuation provokes a tendency toward stereotypy: cognitive behaviours are constantly leveraged and standardized, the contents and possibilities of interacting provided by the services are formatted according to market categories which completely disregard the specificities of the individual life histories. In this sense, the personalized experience boasted by online services is ostensible as it only represents the channelling of behaviours toward targeted, yet predefined patterns of consumption. On the other, a complementary tendency toward fragmentation is also triggered—this tendency being only seemingly opposite to the one toward stereotypy but actually representing the other side of the same phenomenon. Indeed, the passive, forced mediation of every interaction provided by the platforms makes sure that the individuals experience an increasing difficulty to compose common lifeways and participate in collective processes of individuation, their reservoirs of shared experiences being spoiled, destroyed and subsequently replaced with standardized, induced desires. As the phenomenon of digital echo chambers clearly exemplifies, the grouping of similar mindsets and behaviours does not produce social synthesis but rather only contributes to isolation and detachment from reality, substituting its complexities and nuances with brutal, easy-to-sell simplifications (Moore 2017c).

The combination of stereotypy and fragmentation provokes in the individual what I term the occlusion of the protentional system. With this expression I aim to conceptualize an important aspect of the ongoing disruption of the process of organological, anthropotechnical transindividuation: the imposition of standardized, consumption-oriented contents and options to disaffected, demotivated individuals (Stiegler 2006) provokes the narrowing of their horizons of expectations, the restriction of their capability of projecting themselves into a shared future. This phenomenon depends on the modalities according to which tertiary and especially digital retentions select and retain the individual experiences and in so doing structure the temporal constitution of subjectivity. The occlusion of the protentional system influences, on the one hand, the dimensions of the collective one is able to feel to be part of, for the community of belonging is perceived as being increasingly restricted, limited to a few, stereotyped possibilities of interaction. On the other, the extension of the future one is able to imagine, for the capability of projecting a future life is restricted to the quasi-immediate term and the satisfaction of the impelling needs only. We can witness a structural relation, in the form of a positive proportion, between the dimension of the collective one is able to feel to be part of and the width of the temporal horizon one is able to imagine and project herself into. This proportion, which would definitely benefit from further, case-specific investigations, may help us understand why the fragmented groups of individuals also experience a shorter-term future, as is

exemplified even by the gathered communities of rich, privileged people who lost every trust in the possibility of a commitment for their collectives and decided to retreat in enclosed interiors, hoping to survive to the looming ecopolitical catastrophe. Hence, we witness the decay of the capability of empathizing with largescale social configurations, imagining a long-term future life and being motivated to act for shared and cooperative goals.

From this perspective, I stress the need for developing a politics for the future, i.e., a politics that shall both be valid in the future and take care of the future starting from our present. In order to elaborate it, we should act organologically on the technologies, the living organisms constituted by these technologies and the social organizations within which these organisms operate and develop. We should work on the reorganization of our tertiary retentions and especially of digital technologies, their modes of diffusion, employ and adoption, toward a more participative paradigm—in this sense, a politics of the future being necessarily a cyberpolitics. This politics should work toward the reconstruction of complexes of shared concerns and systems of care (Stiegler 2018a), in the sense of the possibility to actively feel part of a collective which projects itself into a common future. Novel, digital technologies should therefore encourage the reactivation of the individuals' potential for differentiation, while fostering their interconnection and capability of identifying with common projects and goals at the same time.

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