

INTERVIEW: FROM LIBIDINAL ECONOMY TO THE ECOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT¹

Bernard Stiegler with Frédéric Neyrat, translated by Arne De Boever²

Frédéric Neyrat You've created, with four other founding members (George Collins, Marc Crépon, Catherine Perret, and Caroline Stiegler), the association *Ars Industrialis*, an "International Association for a Politics of Technologies of the Spirit." What is the association's objective?

Bernard Stiegler We've created this association starting from three main hypotheses. The first is that we live in an industrial world that will become more and more industrial. Therefore, *it's not a question of seeking to pose limits to industry, but of thinking industry otherwise*. The industrialization of modes of life will become more pronounced, there's no other solution. We are completely opposed to the idea that we are living in a post-industrial society. This ideology makes thinking impossible. The "new left" is wrapped up in these lures that prevent one from thinking the future. There are very smart people who speak of the post-industrial society, but on this point they have a fundamental analytical weakness, and a deeply mistaken concept of industry: they think of machines, smoke, the transformation of raw materials, and so on. But that's not at all what industry is: it's standardization, economy of scale, calculability applied to all *processes*: there is industry in all realms—traveling, the realm of affects, or in the "cognitive" domain, as Antonella Corsani, André Gorz, or Yann Moulier Boutang are saying.

Secondly, we think that until now, capitalism has taken on three forms. First there was pre-capitalism, as Max Weber describes it, which led to the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, the great capitalism of machinic production. Then there was consumer capitalism, which developed in the twentieth century. Today, we are living a third form of capitalism that is sometimes called financialization, immaterial capitalism, or also "cognitive capitalism", "cultural capitalism", et cetera. It's what Boltanski and Chiapello call the "new spirit of capitalism". However, I think *there is no "new spirit" of capitalism*; I think that *we are living in a capitalism that doesn't have a spirit, and that suffers from not having a spirit*. I deal with these questions in *Mécréance et discredit 2. Les sociétés incontrôlables d'individus désaffectés* [Non-Belief and Discredit 2. Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals]. We are not in the third capitalism; we are in a crisis of capitalism, a very bad one, which necessitates the invention of a new capitalism. I don't believe that there has always been a

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“cognitive capitalism”. Capitalism has had a tendency to go towards a cognitive capitalism, but this kind of capitalism remains to be invented. These three forms of capitalism must be interpreted starting from a libidinal economy. For us, *capitalism is a libidinal economy*, which is obviously founded on machinic processes, on what Marx had already analyzed as processes of the exteriorisation of knowledge. But Marx, precisely, did not think this as a libidinal economy, and *we think that this libidinal economy, in its current form, has reached the exhaustion of desire*. As a result, it has become auto-destructive. This is why Patrick Artus or Jean Peyrelevade are beginning to speak of the destructive character of capitalism. It’s the bankers themselves who are saying it...

Thirdly, we think that *we must invent a new public power* [puissance publique]. That doesn’t mean a new public utility [service public] or a new State: we don’t think that these forms are necessarily shaky; however, they don’t hold the future. What we need, rather, is a new public power, because we are in a moment of the mutation of the economic and the libidinal system that presupposes long term investment, and a parallel development of the order of what happened with the railroads at the end of the nineteenth century, when capitalism needed to be backed by new infrastructures. And it’s the capitalists themselves who have asked the state to externalize the costs, to make it a mutual cost: it did not bring in enough money, or the benefit was too long term for the rhythm of capitalism. We think that *we are going through a mutation of libidinal economy*; which is to say: of sublimation; which is to say of science and the activities of the spirit in general—a mutation that necessitates new “assemblages”. I’m intentionally using the Deleuzian term. New assemblages between private, banking, industrial, and Research and Development initiatives and a new form of public authority. Not necessarily the State, but also NGOs or associations that are linked with Europe, and capable of creating externalities in view of building a new credit that doesn’t exist at the moment.

We say that it’s truly a question of changing paradigms and seeing the limit-character of the current situation: *when desire is treated industrially, it leads to the destruction of desire*, which triggers the demotivation of the worker and the consumer. This is particularly problematic because capitalism “works”, as Boltanski and Chiapello have said (following Weber), through motivation; without motivation, it doesn’t function. There have been techniques to artificially fabricate motivation, and these techniques have ended up destroying it. *We say that this is an ecological problem*. We have exploited oil fields, coalmines, and we have destroyed that which we exploited, and we must find renewable energies. It’s the same in the realm of desire: *we must find a renewable energy of the libido*.

Now, the libido is constituted by technics: it’s not an energy that develops spontaneously, but it is articulated on the basis of technics: of “fetishes” and, more generally, *protheses*. It’s *technè*, the artefactualization of the living, that constitutes the libido. Freud wasn’t able to think this. Capitalism has understood this very well: it has developed, in a way that is different from Marx, the “fetishism” of the commodity: it has used the power of the captivating artifact to fixate the libido on capitalism’s own objects. The problem is that by doing so, it ended up destroying all the structures that are the conditions for the functioning of this libido—conditions that cannot be reduced to calculability. So capitalism ended up desingularizing the libido by capturing it. Now, a desingularized libido is not a libido; it’s a drive. Today, *capitalism has arrived at its limit, it has transformed libido into drive*. But it doesn’t know what to do with the drive, which explodes in capitalism’s face. That is what we’re witnessing at the moment. September 11 marked the beginning of this situation, which of course existed before that already; but with September 11, it received a historical date.

FN How far does it go, this process of auto-destruction that you describe? If it’s as major and radical as you say, what means do we have left to oppose it? Shouldn’t we be looking for an “indestructible desire”, to recall a term from Freud that Lacan used as well? A desire that’s by definition overflowing in relation to every civilizational process, every industrial politics...

BS If there is something with which the human being cannot negotiate, it’s desire—but to the extent that one has it! The condition of desire is a libidinal economy which must be thought at the collective level. *The*

destruction of desire is the liberation of the drives, and that is the topic of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where Freud speaks of the liberation of the death drive. This is, by the by, the first time that Freud, for whom technics does not exist, speaks of industry and technics. I think that desire is destructible, I think it's big mistake to say that desire is indestructible, it's very dangerous. I know people whose desire has been destroyed; that is to say, whose primordial narcissism has been destroyed. During the conference of *L'information psychiatrique* [Psychiatric Information] in October 2005 in La Rochelle, psychiatrists told me they diagnose the same thing that I am conceptually analyzing, and that the major pathology today is the destruction of desire. There is nothing more dangerous: it's psychosis as a massive social fact. People who suffer from their desire are neurotic; people who suffer from no longer having any desire are psychotic. It's a worldwide phenomenon, at a massive scale, and it's compensated by hyper-consumption. The more this addictive consumption compensates for the loss of desire, the more it supports this loss.

FN There is a very alarmist tone in your propositions and texts: you speak of “decadence,” “symbolic misery,” “generalized expropriation,” of the abolition of “practices” in favor of passive “usages” characteristic of consumption. But there is today a big Market of Fear... So how to differentiate between these fears?

BS What needs to be understood is that we are involved in a battle, a war even: it's an aesthetic war, *a war for the conquest and control of processes of symbolization*. This war is that of the technologies of control, of societies of control. It's not a question of opposing oneself to them but of composing something else; it's not a question of negating the enemy, nor of marking her or him as Evil—whether absolute, radical, or relative. Instead, one must designate the enemy as a tendency. I am thinking of psycho-social processes of individuation, to use a term proposed by Gilbert Simondon: there are processes, but no identities. Stable stages are not the most interesting; they are only moments within processes.

And libidinal economy is an articulation of tendencies and counter-tendencies. Tendencies and counter-tendencies become linked to what can be called Freudian drives, whose core, articulation, and socialization is desire—because for me desire is a socializing force, even if socialization passes through desocialization. They inscribe themselves in processes that I call *grammatizations*: synthesizing processes that Marx thought as processes of exteriorization, and called “alienation”, but which in reality are the processes of the reality of industrialization. “Grammatization” happens to bodies and not only to texts. Think of the industrialization of the gesture, for example, of the body passing through the machine—the body calculated and fixed by the machine. This leads to a *synchronization* tendency that capital can only seek to put to work, because capital needs to calculate, and calculation needs to synchronize: that's what is expressed by “*just in time*” [in English and italicized in the original], real time. At the same time, however, capital needs to produce diachronization, and singularisation, because desire is what makes capital function. Now, desire is of the order of the diachronic, the structurally singular. Of course, the diachronic passes through the synchronic, it's what makes Freud say that Eros passes through Thanatos. There is an internal contradiction, which is proper to all symbolic systems, between these two tendencies: the tendency to affirm diachrony, because it is what renews the system, and the symbolic which always seeks to produce a new symbol, because one can never complete a process of individuation. At the same time, in order to be able to socialize it, it seeks to synchronise it, to inspect it.

Today, there is an industrial mutation--a technological mutation--that's taking place. New machines are appearing: cognitive machines, cultural machines, and now nanotechnologies. There are new processes of exteriorisation: Artificial Intelligence, the cell phone. I have all my telephone numbers in there; I no longer have any memory of those numbers. Until today, these technologies of exteriorization were limited to the world of Research and Development. Now, they are expanding into consumer society at large. They have become socialized absolutely everywhere, including among children who are two years old—among infants [*infans*], even. This completely changes our ways of life.

Indeed, the history of humanity is constituted by successive technical systems that have shorter and shorter lifespans and larger and larger areas of diffusion. Each time these technical systems mutate, they create what

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Bertrand Gille calls *disadjustments between the technical system and the society*. At such a moment there appear what I call *decompositions of tendencies*: all of a sudden, one can see the frontal opposition of hyper-synchronies and hyper-diachronies. They enter into a major conflict. The tendencies, on the other hand, *can only function, can only be efficient and individuating, when they are in close interaction*.

On the one hand, one sees forms of contemporary art that are hyper-diachronized in relation to the hyper-synchronized masses of consumers. But one also sees phenomena, like shareware, that try to put in place new models of production. In response, industrialists try to put a stop to all that. At the same time, however, one sees that Microsoft and IBM are making concessions to shareware, which can no longer be avoided. There are also strange phenomena like the Star Academy, which is hyper-synchronization and hyper-exploitation of symbolic misery. At the same time, however, it also creates a space for kids who don't just want to become consumers, and want to sing. Or also MP3s, piracy, et cetera. All of this contributes to major contradictions sketching out a landscape that's extremely complex, and that's not only made up of the elimination of practices by usages, that much is clear.

On the other hand, there unfortunately exists at the meta-economic or meta-industrial level *a temptation to organize this elimination* by saying one must stop all existing models and prevent new models from emerging. One must consolidate TF1³ in its hegemonic position, whereas everybody knows that this model is ruining itself. But instead of saying: we're going to put in place a new industrial politics, we are going to bring together these tendencies that are currently in opposition, we remain in an absolutely reactionary phase. TF1 will not change because it makes a lot of money. But we know that this model is on the way to collapse—and we still let TF1 have its way. That is what I find absolutely catastrophic. So, there a number of very interesting practices, but *they aren't thought through politically and industrially*. They are countered with industrial interests that only operate with the (very) short-term perspective.

So, *how to politicize diachrony*, how to make a politics of singularities? It's a paradox, an aporia, but it's the aporia of politics, and I think it's always this particular thing that makes societies function. For centuries, millennia even, this aporia has been called God. There was a sphere that the Romans called *otium*, and this was the sphere of the symbolic, which put the object of desire on another plane than that of economy. God is dead, we have entered into the age of generalized calculability, of secularization, of nihilism. So how do we deal with this? Ars Industrialis says: we must reconstruct a sphere of the spirit, but this time this sphere must think itself as intrinsically technological and industrial, capable of producing singularities starting from the industrial. At this point, people generally laugh at us and say: you are all very nice people, but we economists and entrepreneurs, we know that industry can only produce assembly line reproducibility, in other words: the non-singular.

But this is wrong. It is evident that in the industrial world there is a basic layer, a *hypokeimenon* if you want, that rests on the reproducibility of things and generalized calculability. But Ars Industrialis maintains that there is no opposition between calculation and the incalculable. "In the poem there must be a number that prevents one from counting," Claudel says. It's in fact calculation that creates the incalculable, there is no opposition between the calculable and the incalculable. On the other hand, one can also produce an *economy of the incalculable through calculation*, one can also produce an *economy of the destruction of the incalculable through calculation*. Our position is that *capitalism today produces an economy of the destruction of the incalculable through the calculable*, and therefore a destruction of itself. Because there is no capitalism without the incalculable: there must be a motive, and this *motive* is the future insofar as it is indeterminate.

How can the layer of calculation, the computational *hypokeimenon* of calculability, produce fruits and make grow plants of singularity? Precisely by developing practices. It's not, for example, because musical instruments are produced in an industrial way—as is the case at IRCAM⁴—that there is a loss of singularity. When the Greeks standardize all the Greek languages through the Attic alphabet, which is officially put in place in 403 BC as the written standard for all languages, many languages will disappear, but it's not as if singularity will disappear:

on the contrary, it's from this development that the singularity of Greek citizenship will emerge. *I do not oppose the standard to the singular*. But I do think that one must critique, in the Kantian sense of the term, not in order to denounce or resist—Ars Industrialis does not believe in resistance—, but in order to *invent models of individuation*, that is to say of singularization, which pass through a resocialization, a reorganization of the relation between the psychic and the collective individual through technics.

This presupposes a reinvention of the *otium* of the people. It's in this way that industrial democracy will allow the “people” to learn to read and write. This was first framed through religious culture, and Marx called it the “opium of the people”; but Marx' analysis is too narrow on this count. The second figure of this process is secular, public education, which says: yes, the proletarians have the right to spend ten years getting an education. That's what the Greeks said about *skholè*, this right to a time that is entirely dedicated to the loss of time into *otium*, into sublimated idealities that I call “consistencies”: Pythagoras, Van Gogh, Descartes, geography and history, Artaud... Bataille said it very clearly in 1949, in his critique of the Marshall plan: the Americans must understand that one cannot build an economy the way one changes a wheel—at a certain moment, the *potlatch* must be reinserted into it. It's this last element that remains unthought today, and that a new economy must seek to put into place.

There are many social practices today, but there is a battle going on about their future. We adopt an alarmist tone because we think that the contemporary situation—in France, Europe, and the world at large—is terrible: the planet hasn't had a situation like this since World War II. Secondly, we say there is a war going on, and that we need to get mobilized. And, thirdly, it's not a question of killing our adversaries—they are not enemies. The aim is to avoid military war.

FN In a regime of immanence, war is internal. But in that case, will reinvestment of desire be able to happen in any other way than within this regime of immanence?

BS Yes, what I'm calling “consistencies” is not another world—it's another plane. A plane is not a world. The world is layered, stratified, made of several dimensions. The heart of the world's immanence is made up by the fact that the object of desire cannot not be turned into an absolute. When people say there is only immanence left, this means there is no more absolute. Today, when one is in a libidinal investment, it's impossible not to know that it is a fantasm. In other words, *it's impossible not to know that every object of desire can be reduced to a calculability*, to a phenomenon of singular, fantasmatic, infinitisation, and in this sense it is extremely fragile. That's a given. But it doesn't do away with the fact that there is only an object of desire if this object is infinite: one can only desire an object if it is lived like an object of infinite desire, even at the moment when one knows that desire is finite. I know that desire is finite—at least I think I know it—, but I have objects of desire—my daughter, my children, my wife, but also certain works that I admire and that *appear* to me as infinite. And this appearance—this apparition—is the “plane of consistency”. It's another plane, but that doesn't mean that it's another world.

I believe in the world: my belief is a belief in the world. But the world cannot be reduced to calculability. Many people have understood the immanent character of the world as “everything can be calculated.” That's not true: within a calculated whole, there is only no-world [*il n'y a que de l'immonde*]. That's precisely the objective of the societies of control. When Deleuze says we must try to invent an art of control, however, he means that *we must depart from control, that is to say from calculation*, to produce incalculable objects: incomparable and infinite singularities (one does not calculate only things that can be compared). We are in a dimension of immanence that cannot be calculated.

FN So you wouldn't hold to the formula that we must produce transcendence.

BS No, transcendence doesn't interest me in the least. One must fight against it, it's the temptation of our time. We must try to understand this phantasm of the production of transcendence, not brush it aside.

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It's something that's inscribed at the heart of a *spiritual misery*. To say there is no transcendence does not mean to say there is no spirit. Spirit is the heart of libidinal economy: it's return, repetition. *Spirit is not spirituality*, and on this point Valéry is important: because he tries to think spirit not starting from transcendence, but precisely from industry. He says that there is a drop of spirit-value and that the ultimate productions of the spirit are industrial machines. What we get here is an immanentist spirit. What we are trying to say is that *to think spirit is to think industry*.

FN What do you mean then by an "ecology of the spirit"? Do you establish a hierarchy between this form of ecology and its other, more traditional articulations (the energy question, climate change, Genetically Modified Organisms)?

BS *The ecology of the spirit is a question of the re-articulation of psychic individuation, collective individuation, and technical individuation.* These three regimes, these three realms, are intrinsically linked and, at times, they throw each other off and cannibalize each other. One must from now on rebuild a new public space, regimes of singularities within a technical organization, reinvent a new "public thing" [*chose publique*]⁵ that is capable of producing a long-term politics.

If we want meaningful transformations to happen in the future of the planet in terms of the climate, for example, individual behaviors need to be transformed. These individual behaviors must become more conscious, more attentive, more caring towards that which surrounds them. And they must turn that which surrounds them into an object of desire. This happens through an elevation of collective intelligence, *that is to say through a relaunching of desire*. We ingest more and more sugar and fat, we eject and *produce more and more CO₂* because we are in *this situation of symbolic misery, and we try to make up for it through things that make us consume an enormous amount of materials*, and materials that, when consumed under those conditions, produce an enormous amount of toxins. But this toxicity is first of all that of the destruction of the symbolic through the industrial populism that is the enemy of the beautiful and all things like it.

FN One must thus think Genetically Modified Organisms starting from their condition of technological possibility. One can encode, sequence, "make discrete" (to use of one of your own terms) the living because it is thought in terms of information: is that not a way of discrediting the living, or "nature"?

BS I don't trust the term nature because it is loaded with the opposition to culture and the opposition to technics and I don't like oppositional models. By contrast, I am interested in the pre-individual and the vital pre-individual. And I am against an informational model of the living, which is false, inefficient, and dangerous, I fight against it. The living cannot be reduced to information.

For millions of years, the living human being drove technics forward. But the living human being was not reducible to technics, because of the fact that there was no possibility for the *soma* [body] to re-design the *germen* [sprout, shoot, bud]. That is what has changed, and it's an absolutely major rupture. That is what's at stake with nano-technologies: we need to think an absolutely new object, a living technics, and a life technicized from within.

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NOTES

1. TN: “Spirit” translates the French word *esprit*, which could also be rendered as “mind” (there is a similar problem with the German word *Geist*). The first manifesto of Ars Industrialis (dated 2005, and available in an English translation on the organization’s website) reflects on this issue, and chooses to translate *esprit* as “spirit”. However, in the manifesto the authors also emphasize their attachment to the term “mind”, which draws out more explicitly their affiliation with the works of Hannah Arendt, and especially of Gregory Bateson.
2. TN: The interview was originally published in *Multitudes* 1:24 (2006), 85-95. The French original is available at: <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/De-l-economie-libidinale-a-l>. I would like to thank Frédéric Neyrat for granting us permission to publish this translation, and for his helpful suggestions and comments.
3. TN: A national French TV channel.
4. TN: Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique [Institute of Acoustic/Musical Research and Coordination].
5. TN: A Latin translation for *chose publique* could be *res publica*, which is the Latin expression from which the English word “republic” originates. However, when I discussed this translation with Bernard Stiegler in the context of a research seminar on energy in the Summer of 2009, he pointed out that his use of the expression *chose publique* is indebted to Jacques Lacan’s discussion of the word *Ding* (the German word for “thing”, the French *chose*) in his 1959-1960 seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. *Chose publique* is not exactly *res publica*; using the expression entails rethinking what we mean by *res*, *chose*, *thin*.