

the epoch of psychopower... between shame and contempt¹

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The current capture of attention by technological means, in societies where the empire of television² reigns, is organised as psychopower which diverts and eventually destroys attention.

Contempt manifests the absence of shame [*vergogne*]. In Greek, shame is called *aidōs*, a name resonating with that of Hades, and is a feeling that Protagoras considers to be, along with the feeling for justice (*dikē*), the condition of a dignified life. The idea of *vergogne*, a word no longer used in French,³ is nowadays expressed through a locution of a rather unusual construction: to have shame [*avoir honte*] (just as one speaks of *having* feelings or thirst—while one *is* happy,

sad, intelligent, in love, wicked, rich, etc.). *Vergogne* is the *capacity* to have shame, to be affected by this feeling that one has, and *that one is not*, which falls upon you in some sense, and which is shame [*honte*]. To be *sans vergogne*, shameless, is to have become incapable of being ashamed [*avoir honte*].⁴

It is this shame [*honte*] that Primo Levi encounters in the face of the most unimaginable effects of the absence of *vergogne*—of the loss of all *aidōs*, well beyond the loss of *dikē*—an absence that has turned into the criminal, national and industrial organisation of contempt.

Today, however, and probably more than ever, we encounter many ordinary, all too ordinary forms of contempt, and we do so in the most quotidian aspects of everyday life. This is true to such an extent that we have come to believe that our ordinary life is *based* on contempt: on this absence of *vergogne*. It is this everyday and banal character of contempt that Axel Honneth refers to as *Missachtung*, a word literally meaning *non-attention*. Honneth speaks in this sense of a *society* of contempt.⁵ Etymology tells us that attention would also be the semantic kernel of *vergogne*, of which the noun, from the Latin *verecundia*, derives from *vereri*, which itself comes from the Indo-European **swer-*: to be careful, to pay attention.⁶

Attention is the faculty of desiring *par excellence* (in a sense clearly different from that of Kant), while contempt, as non-attention, *Missachtung*, results from the annihilation of desire. Axel Honneth analyses the causes and effects of *Missachtung*, this lack of attention that is contempt, taking up the questions of the young Hegel, and in particular that famous struggle for recognition,⁷ which is to say for *existence*, insofar as it is irreducible to *subsistence*. And we know since Alexandre Kojève that the struggle for recognition is a *desire for desire*.⁸

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To feel shame is to experience the opposite of contempt in the face of what may be contemptible. The contemptible is that which *may* arouse [*susciter*] contempt, which is itself contemptible: the contemptible and contempt are contagious, and are so in the first place because they can and must arouse shame—the shame of feeling concerned by this possibility of becoming contemptible oneself, *capable* [*susceptible*] of being contemptible in the very moment where the contemptible appears as such: falling upon us, and making us *ashamed*. Shame is precisely the feeling of one who, faced with the contemptible, does not himself fall into contempt—all while feeling how close he ultimately and always is to succumbing to it: all while feeling how *concerned* he is by contempt, by the contemptible.

The examples offered by Gilles Deleuze, referring to Primo Levi, of what can evoke shame are the most ordinary—and, writes Deleuze, the most *derisory*: they are our ordinary. Television programs, ministerial remarks, the behaviours of ‘bon vivants’—these can make one feel “ashamed of being a man”. But, instead of shame, these behaviours can arouse contempt. Contempt is thus *what neutralises the very possibility of shame*. Contempt imitates that which it holds in contempt: the contemptible begets the contemptible.

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Contempt is that which arouses shame because it is without shame, as Patrick Le Lay⁹ demonstrated, attesting through his own lack of shame that the destruction of all *vergogne* had become the very principle of operation of telecratic societies, and with it, *indignity*. Like attention, contempt—as absolute non-attention and total absence of *vergogne*—is a characteristic of the non-inhuman being, this being that we *tend* towards being (elevated *above* the inhuman). This being *tends* constantly towards the inhuman and is human only insofar as it *struggles* against inhumanity, *between* these two tendencies, and for the recognition of its non-inhumanity,

against this inhumanity that it bears within itself, like a facet of its secrecy—but only as a facet. The other face, the other secret, is that which raises this being out from and against this inhumanity, by making of it an *inverse dynamic*, and by this *power of inversion which is also the primary character of the libido qua perversion* (this latter being the condition of the mobility of the drives and their trans-formation into desire).

Vergogne and absence of *vergogne*, shame and contempt, and everything that involves recognition, attention, esteem and hatred, *philia* and enmity, narcissism and identification (rather than identity, whose phantasm is productive of so much contempt),¹⁰ all this is *formed* socially, and in this manner is trans-formed and trans-mitted. Today, all of this has become *the heart of economic activity*, but in an *an-economic*, and even *anti-economic* sense—given that an economy worthy of the name, economy as *reserve* (which is also what is meant by *vergogne*), is what puts in reserve what, precisely, the absence of shame annihilates without reservation.

If contempt is non-attention, then the current *capture* of attention—inasmuch as it leads to a psychopathology that is originally a sociopathology (“attention deficit disorder” according to American diagnostics, an effect which has become widely observed among youth)—is an *organisation of Missachtung and of contempt* for those who suffer from this great ill of the 21st century. This organisation is what emerges with the technologies of a psychopower that captures, diverts and exploits attention—in this way constituting a mutation in the history of the struggle for recognition—and which leads to the destruction of this attention (of this recognition): to non-attention, to the *Missachtung* that is contempt.¹¹

The capture of attention by technological means is a phenomenon that is global (it affects *all continents*), massive (it affects *all generations* and *all social strata*) and completely new. This capture averages more than six hours a day in the United States, not to mention those situations of “hyper attention” (to use N. Katherine Hayles’ term)¹² which lead to a splitting of attention between multiple forms of media simultaneously. For this reason, the Kaiser Family Foundation estimates

that the attention of American youth is ultimately channelled eight and a half hours per day¹³ by technologies of this psychopower.

Never before has humanity experienced this kind of hyper-realist and industrially synchronised collective hallucination. The implications of these facts for psychosocial individuation are yet to be adequately theorised, even if they have begun to be made the object of studies of psychopathology, or of research in the human sciences. Most of the time, pathogenic factors caused by this state of affairs have been analysed in neurocentric terms—thus being questions linked to attentional deficit—where in fact the causality is massively sociotechnical and therefore economico-political, even if it is evidently combined with [individual] neuropsychic “landscapes” [*terrains*].

This dreadful neurobiologisation is a scientific rationalisation of contempt.

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In *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, I attempt to put forward a theory of attention (and of *Missachtung*) that continues the pathways opened up in *Disbelief and Discredit*.¹⁴ I relate this question of psychological and phenomenological construction [*facture*] (which I analysed in socio-therapeutic terms in *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*¹⁵) to the question of care: to a question of therapeutics, in the sense this word can have in ancient Greek. Psychic and collective individuation can only occur through the formation and maintenance of a general system of care, the first condition of which is education understood in the broadest sense, which is to say as an intergenerational relation—one aspect of which is the transmission of knowledge—and as the formation of attention as a faculty that is first of all *both* psychic and social—with *Missachtung* being the dysfunction of the process of individuation.

The *destructive* capture of attention—a destruction that is technological, industrial, systematic and constant—which has been called “cultural capitalism”, and which gives rise to such a dysfunction, is made possible by the emergence of psychotechnologies and amounts to the birth of what must therefore be analysed as psychopower.

The techniques of management and marketing based upon “storytelling”; the very recent rediscovery of Edward Bernays with the publication of *Propaganda*¹⁶ in French, in October 2007; the place of “soft power” in American geopolitics; the “psychological” character, both emotional and drive-based, of the recent French electoral campaign (where “celebrity culture” [*“peopolisation”*] is, in reality, a form of psychopolitics of symbolic poverty [*misère symbolique*]);¹⁷ the unprecedented dynamism of new forms of media; the immense effects of their techno-industrial integration via digitalisation; Google attempting to take control of mobile telephony, which is to say of motor functions [*motricité*]; Microsoft attempting to buy Yahoo to create a global system of controlling attention which is also and more profoundly a system of *control of transindividuation* through what we now call social media (and “social engineering”): all these, and many other phenomena, are embodiments [*concrétisations*] of psychopower.

Thus, psychopower radically threatens the apparatus [*dispositif*] of attention construction: the industrial exploitation of attention leads to the destruction of attention—to non-attention, to *Missachtung*—of which channel surfing is one benign manifestation. Here we encounter a limit of capitalism—induced by the tendency of libidinal energy to fall, a kind of *secondary infection* stemming from the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the latter being what the industrial exploitation of libidinal energy (that is, of desire, *Wunsch* and *Begierde*) was precisely intended to counteract. For the object of attention is always an object of desire, while there is no desire without an object. To destroy attention is to destroy the object of attention, that is, the object of desire and desire itself.

This is so for reasons that were already examined by Plato in *Phaedrus*: we are dealing here with questions of *pharmacology*. The question of contempt, of non-attention, of *Missachtung*, is essentially pharmacological. More precisely, it stems from a pharmacology and a therapeutics of attention—and from the difference that must be made, precisely, between pharmacology and therapeutics.

Attention is *always* formed through devices [*artifices*] that capture attention, which, in addition, are *pharmaka* in Plato's sense. This means that the supports of the *formation* of attention are also the instruments of its *de-formation*—when they fall into the hands of pharmacists without medical control, these pharmacists thereby become *dealers*. The destructive capture of attention—such that it generates non-attention qua a “society” of *Missachtung* and contempt, a society which is no longer instituted, but on the contrary destituted (and by what I have called a dissociated milieu¹⁸)—has economic, political, health and noetic consequences, of which the analysis of neo-Nazi psychology by Ingo Hasselbach and Winfried Bonengel, cited in *The Society of Contempt*,¹⁹ is an extreme case (I myself have analysed others).²⁰

The combination of these consequences leads to limits being crossed and the consequences suddenly worsened and taken to their extremes, with *Missachtung* being precisely the *extremity as such* (and as an encounter with the limit): the extremity socially concretised as extremism. The combination of these consequences constitutes the vicious circle of an industrialised libidinal economy that has become self-destructive. And this vicious circle is a vortex, which raises the question of what we could call a renewable libidinal energy—which is also to say, of a new age of marketing.

By this last remark, I mean that I do not situate myself in the position of rejecting (or having contempt for) industrial society. Such an attitude is completely futile,

irresponsible, and truly desperate. It is one that has been adopted by a number of figures from the world of letters, and for me this is something to be infinitely regretted. On the other hand, neither do I identify myself with that consensus which abandons critique, nor do I subscribe to that form of disbelief (and contempt) which consists in believing that the world cannot be changed, which in the United States is called the logic of TINA: *there is no alternative*. In other words, I have been fighting—in an explicit manner, since *Technics and Time*, 3²¹—for the advent of what I call a new critique, which I understand, however, in a sense rather different from that of Axel Honneth.

Psychopower calls for a psychopolitics claiming the status of *noopolitics*. This alone (this psychopolitics conceiving itself as noopolitics) can reconstitute attention—for such are the stakes, and on every front: economy, security, well-being and the flourishing of individuals and groups, etc. The elevation of psychopolitics to the status of *noopolitics* cannot consist of anything other than a process of sublimation. Since attention is pharmacological—that which forms and maintains it being also that which allows it to be deformed, destroyed and to produce its opposite, which is contempt as *Missachtung*—politics can only be that which takes responsibility for turning this pharmacology into a therapy. And not simply a psychotherapy (a care of souls) but a socio-therapy: a care of the mind [*esprit*], of the *we* [*nous*][—]which is the fruit of the struggle for recognition.

What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: “I” that is “We” and “We” that is “I”.²²

But what this Hegelian dialectic of recognition ignores is precisely that attention, insofar as it is woven of retentions and protentions, is conditioned by the psychotechniques of what Plato called *hypomnesis*, which constitute tertiary retentions, and which, having become psychotechnologies (which is to say

industrial retentional devices and systems), are the organs of psychopower as the destitution of society. This calls for the constitution of a noopolitics: of a rediscovered power of the spirit.

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Attention is formed by the play of retentions and protentions, and it is this—by means of the retentional devices that constitute public or private institutions and social organisations, by organising tertiary retentions—that allows for the implementation of politics of attention.

The formation²³ of at-tention always consists in the arrangements, via the intermediary of psychotechnics, of re-tentions and pro-tentions. Attention is the flow of consciousness. This flow is temporal, and as such it is constituted in the first place by what Husserl analysed in terms of primary retentions. “Primary” retentions are those through which an appearing object, which is to say a present object, is constituted, the contours of which I retain as its very presence. This retention, which is *primary* precisely in that it relates to perception, is conditioned by *secondary* retentions (by the past of attentive consciousness), which form its experience. By selecting from primary retentions on the basis of secondary retentions, consciousness projects protentions, which is to say expectations. It is this organisation of (primary and secondary) retentions projecting protentions, which is to say expectations, that constitutes attention.

However, the *formation* of attention is always already that of *both* a psychic faculty *and* a social faculty to the extent that its capture channels primary retentions according to the secondary psychic retentions of the individual, but does so by inscribing them in *collective* secondary retentions that are symbolised and supported by *tertiary* retentions. Collective *individuation* is constituted from

collective *retentions*, common to those who psychically co-individuate only on the basis of sharing a common retentional stock [*fonds*]. This retentional stock—which forms what Simondon calls a pre-individual milieu, where a transindividuation takes place—is formed by objects that are also the objectified recollections of an epiphylogenetic, which is to say technical, memory. It is within this epiphylogenetic milieu that properly mnemonic—which is to say hypomnesic—objects appear, which, as tertiary retentions, form the material bases of psychotechnics.

When *collective* secondary retentions are “tertiarised”, that is, when they are materially and spatially projected onto psychotechnical supports, they can be internalised by those who have not lived them, and who project onto them their own lived secondary retentions, which is a specific case of what Freud himself calls projection. This projective mechanism, which is the basis of the process of adoption, is also that which enables the constitution of the transindividual: the *formation of attention through its social capture*, which is called *education*, is the path by which psychic individuals not only co-individuate, but transindividuate—including at the level of the unconscious, which can also be said in this respect to be “structured like a language”.

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Attention always presupposes attentional techniques. Today these psychotechniques, which include what Plato called *hypomnesis*, have become psychotechnologies totally and hegemonically controlled by an industrial organisation of retentional devices in the exclusive service of shameless forms of marketing—begetting a generalised *Missachtung*. This psychopower, for a long time conceived in the United States as *soft power*, has become devastating, taking care of nothing and imposing the reign of non-attention. This is why the constitution of a psychopolitics reaffirming itself as *noopolitics* through *technologies*

of the mind is the great challenge of the reorganisation of capitalism—at a time when it is confronted with the limits of its model of development, based on a massive and unsustainable production of carbon dioxide, and in the face of which the modification of models of behaviour requires a revival of individual and collective capacities for sublimation.

NOTES

1. Translators Note: Originally published in *La pensée de midi*, 24-25 (2008): 59-69.
2. Translators Note: It is worth bearing in mind both the year that this article was originally published, and the fact that Stiegler has a broad conception of the term 'television' as referring, more or less, to audiovisual temporal objects (in Husserl's sense) in general, including today video-based phenomena such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc. This is why he begins his article entitled "New Industrial Temporal Objects" by stating, for example: "I would like to begin with an affirmation which at first glance may seem shocking, if not iconoclastic: I include television in cinema." See, Bernard Stiegler, "New Industrial Temporal Objects." In: *Frontiers of Human-Centered Computing, Online Communities and Virtual Environments*, edited by R.A. Earnshaw, R.A. Guedj, A.v.Dam, and J.A. Vince, London: Springer, 2001, pp. 445-60.
3. *Verguenza*, on the other hand, is still very common in Spanish.
4. Translators Note: The semantic fields encompassed by the terms *honte* and *vergogne* pose a particular difficulty for translation. We have elected to translate *avoir honte* and *honte* by "have shame," "ashamed," or "shame," with the particular variant determined by context. For *vergogne*, we have most often elected to retain the original French word. However, while starting the essay by outlining a distinction between the two terms, Stiegler then proceeds to use the terms in composition, and so the distinction becomes less essential later on.
5. Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
6. Cf. Alain Rey, *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, Paris: Robert, 2006.
7. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.
8. Contempt is what breaks the circuit of recognition whose ordinary name is attention, and which presupposes *vergogne* (*aidōs*). In other words, contempt is what destroys desire, and the possibility of the desire for desire, by way of the master-slave dialectic. This desire is reflected in another desire, which it makes its object, and as the object of its attention which is therefore also its phantasm, its phenomenon. This reflection, this *mirage* that is the basis for *aidōs*, and the condition of all dignity, is what lies at the origin of self-consciousness, as it is formed directly by this object of attention that is consciousness, in a process that Hegel calls his phenomenology and of which he describes its first moment in the following way: "...self-consciousness is *Desire* [*Begierde*, inclination, leaning, longing] in general. Consciousness, as self-consciousness, henceforth has a double object: one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception, which *however for self-consciousness* has the character of a *negative*; and the second, viz. *itself*, which is the true *essence*, and is present in the first instance only as opposed to the first object." G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 105. Interpolation in square brackets is Stiegler's.
9. Translators Note: In 2004, Patrick Le Lay, CEO of TF1 (the French public television channel privatized in 1987) caused a scandal in France when he made the following statement about the channel's aims: "There are many ways to talk about television. But from a business perspective, let's be realistic: basically, TF1's job is to help Coca-Cola, for example, sell its product".... "For an advertising message to be perceived, the viewer's brain has to be available. The aim of our programs is to make them available, in other words, to entertain them, relax them and prepare them between two messages. What we sell to Coca-Cola is available human brain time. Nothing is more difficult than obtaining this availability".... TF1's logic is one of power. We sell our

customers a mass audience, a number of individuals likely to watch an advertising spot. For advertisers, airtime represents nothing more than ‘customer contacts’. Human attention” (Le Monde, “Patrick Le Lay s’explique dans ‘Télérama’ sur ses propos controversés”, 7 September 2004: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/09/07/patrick-le-lay-s-explique-dans-telerama-sur-ses-propos-controverses_378186_1819218.html).

10. Here, I am not in agreement with Axel Honneth when he writes, for example, that “a criterion for what has to be regarded as a ‘disorder’ or pathological development of social life” must be constituted by “the intersubjective condition of human identity development” (*Disrespect*, p. 74). In *Prendre Soin. Tome 1, De la jeunesse et des générations*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008 [Eng. Trans.: *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*. Translated by Stephen Barker, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010], I attempted to demonstrate that the question which must be posed is not that of identity, but that of a process of identification which precisely allows us not to be locked into the phantasm of an identity—generator of so much *Missachtung*.

11. Perhaps this becoming is inscribed in what appears after the fact to have been this ominous [*sinistre*] portent heralding an age of lovelessness: “The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title ‘love of knowing’ and be *actual* knowing—that is what I have set myself to do” (Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 3).

12. N. Katherine Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: the Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” *Profession*, 2007, pp. 187-199.

13. Translators Note: The precise source referred to by the author is not known. More recent information suggests that between 2019 and 2021, the total amount of screen media used each day among tweens rose from 4 hours 33 minutes to 5:33, and among teens from 7:22 to 8:39, and that this increase had accelerated since the start of the pandemic. See *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*, 2021, p.3. https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_o.pdf.

14. Translators Note: This refers to a three-volume series: *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 1, La décadence des démocraties industrielles*, Paris: Galilée, 2004 [Eng. trans.: *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 1*. Translated by Daniel Ross and Suzanne Arnold, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011]; *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 2, Les sociétés incontrôlables d’individus désaffectés*, Paris: Galilée, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 2*. Translated by Daniel Ross, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013]; *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 3, L’esprit perdu du capitalisme*, Paris: Galilée, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 3*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014].

15. *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 3, L’esprit perdu du capitalisme*, Paris: Galilée, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 3*. Translated by Daniel Ross, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014].

16. *Propaganda: comment manipuler l’opinion en démocratie*, Paris: La Découverte, 2007; Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1928.

17. Translators Note: Although the English translation of Stiegler’s 2004 two-volume work *De la misère symbolique* was titled “*Symbolic Misery*”, the French word *misère* is perhaps more appropriately translated as “poverty” or “impoverishment”.

18. Bernard Stiegler and Ars Industrialis, *Réenchâter le monde : la valeur esprit contre le populisme industriel*, Paris: Flammarion, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *The Re-Enchantment of the World: The Value of Spirit Against Industrial Populism*. Translated by Trevor Arthur, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014], and Bernard Stiegler, *La Télécratie contre la démocratie*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008.

19. Honneth, *Disrespect*, p. 201.

20. In particular the cases of Richard Durn, of Patricia and Emmanuel Cartier, and of terrorist forms of fundamentalism.

21. *La technique et le temps. Tome 3, Le temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être*, Paris: Galilée, 2001 [Eng. trans.: *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. Translated by Stephen Barker, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010].

22. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110.

23. Translators Note: *Formation* in French includes notions of education and training, as well as processes of enculturation.

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