

“Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals”

Bernard Stiegler

This text is an excerpt from the introduction to Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals: Disbelief and Discredit (Vol. 2) by Bernard Stiegler, translated into English by Daniel Ross © Polity Press, Cambridge 2012.

Symbolic misery leads irresistibly to spiritual misery. By this expression I refer firstly to that which paralyzes the functions of the human spirit. The word ‘esprit’¹ refers here to a noetic process that is both psychic and collective (cerebral and social): spirit is what exceeds the I and connects it to the we, the condition of the ‘and’ of psychic and collective individuation, just as is, moreover, technics. The spirit I am referring to is not some kind of vapour or pure idea, a pure form, or even what one calls ‘pure spirit’, but that which, passing through the organization of matter, opens the process of conjunctions and disjunctions, and thus of transformations and trans-individuations, in which psychic and collective individuation consists.

And it is in this way – insofar as it is always already both psychic and collective – that knowledge [*connaissance*] is a fruit of spirit: knowledge only exists to the degree that it is circulated and transmitted, and to the degree that, through this transmission, it is transformed, engendering new knowledge(s) (thereby constituting the history of what Husserl called a ‘transcendental we’), and therefore also as such forming and trans-forming the course of individuation at its highest level. Knowledge [*connaissance*] is, however, itself only a highly refined form of those types of knowing [*savoirs*] that constitute spirit. Now, the latter are, first and foremost – including in those societies that lack knowledge [*connaissance*] (understood here as theoretical formalization) – the knowledge of *savoir-faire* (know-how, skill) and *savoir-vivre* (knowledge of how to live).

The process of individuation today, and insofar as it consists in a permanent transformation of *savoir-faire*, of *savoir-vivre*, and of knowledge [*connaissance*], only occurs in conditions of extreme control, to the point that it becomes doubtful that this is still a matter of individuation. Gil-

bert Simondon expresses such doubt in relation to the *savoir-faire* of the worker-become-proletarian,² hence his assertion that the proletariat has been *disindividuated*. And I myself harbour such doubts in relation to the *savoir-vivre* of consumers, whom I believe to be disindividuated, and thus proletarianized in their turn, resulting in what I have called generalized proletarianization.³ It is, in the end, questionable whether that knowledge engendered by the industrialization of knowledge and by cognitive technologies – in particular insofar as these produce a syndrome of *cognitive saturation*, and have *entropic* effects for hypotheses, axioms and research methods – still *constitutes* a genuine process of individuation for the contemporary *épistémè*.

More particularly, spiritual misery, insofar as it is the blockage or destruction of psychic and social circuits through which the objects of spirit are constituted – which are the objects of *admiration*, *sublimation*, and *love* (of art, science, language, knowledge, and wisdom, which in Greek is called *philo-sophia*) – this blockage or this destruction, then, also engenders an *anxiogenic situation* that *aggravates and reinforces* this paralysis of the human psycho-social spirit: the noetic soul feels that, deprived of its premier faculty, thought, its capacity to discern and therefore to anticipate, and to *want and to act knowingly*, is *radically threatened* – and with it, the human species in totality.

The noetic soul tends then to *regress towards reactive behaviour and the survival instinct*, which induces, in the desiring beings that we are, the *reign of the drives* [*pulsions*] – and in particular the drives of destruction and of those compulsions that are its symptoms, thus resulting in the proliferation of addictions. The spiritual functions are then wholly tetanized, resulting in a vicious circle that can only lead, if it persists, to *panic behaviour*. This adjective, ‘panic’, haunted by the god Pan and his Syrinx, does not refer here merely to fear, but to the *herdish reactions* induced by this fear, in which *all* (in Greek, *pan*) are included. This is then the *reign or kingdom of stupidity* [*règne de la bêtise*].

We live under this reign: such is our misery. Now, this situation engenders in its turn a new element of desublimation, that is, of de-spiritualization or, in Valéry’s terms, of ‘the lowering of the spirit value, *la valeur esprit*’, if not its absolute destruction: *despair* [*désespoir*], that is, the destruction of the *kingdom of ends* in which, as Kant taught, reason consists. Reason is in fact intrinsically tied to hope [*espoir*], or in other words to aims – even if only in the form of idealities and noemes, and those idealizations that Freud described as being intrinsically engendered by the amorous life in which the human spirit specifically consists

– goals and motives without which the human being is little more than an algorithmic machine, that is, a system of comparisons reducible to a set of calculations without a point [*sans objet*].

What Weber called disenchantment bears within it such a becoming, a becoming reactive and, ultimately, stupid [*bête*], and this is also what Nietzsche referred to as nihilism. This becoming brings about the fall of those metaphysical delusions that philosophy itself undermined by elaborating, through the centuries, the *spirit of critique*, that is, of freedom. For this reason, however, this becoming brings with it the potential for an unprecedented transformation: it calls forth a *new epoch of the spirit, that is, of civilization*.

But more immediately, this results in the forms of spirit transmitted by this disenchantment process being destroyed *without being transformed*, that is, without leading to their *individuation*, and it is for this reason that I claim, in the first volume of *Disbelief and Discredit*, that we are living through a *decadence* of industrial democracy.

Disenchantment, when carried to extremes, may have allowed capitalism to conquer the entire world, but it eventually leads to the *loss of the capitalist spirit*. Now I believe, as Weber undoubtedly believed, and as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello believe,⁴ that a capitalism totally deprived of spirit, that is, in the end, of motivation, or in other words of *motives for living*, of what I have just called the kingdom of ends – such a capitalism, *having lost its spirit or its mind*, is not possible. Unlike Boltanski and Chiapello, I do not believe that current capitalism has engendered a ‘new spirit of capitalism’. I believe, on the contrary, that capitalism is very profoundly threatened *by itself*, and that this is the reason, whether consciously or otherwise, that Medef [*Mouvement des Entreprises de France*, the French business organization] took the ‘re-enchantment of the world’ as the theme of its summer school in 2005, while in the meantime several books have appeared, some from the economic and financial spheres, that are critical of the direction in which contemporary capitalism is headed.

The destruction of spirit leads to the loss of all hope, but also to the loss of the very possibility of constituting horizons of expectation of a *we*. This is the result when capitalism – in order to penetrate every market and to exploit every possibility revealed by industrial innovation, at the same time continuously disrupting social structures, that is, those systems of collective individuation through which psychic individuals find their place – succeeds in destroying every barrier to the circulation of commodities. The circulation of commodities then comes to replace the

circulation of the works of spirit, and as such leads to the outright *liquidation of the super-ego* as a system of prohibitions, and to the liquidation of *sublimation as that socialization through which desire constitutes itself insofar as, being psychic, it is always already also collective* – including in its transgressive forms, these being what I refer to as the Antigone complex.

This loss of spirit above all takes the form, massively, of industrial populism, the exploitation of ‘available brain time’, systematically targeting drive-based and regressive mechanisms, and operating *against spirit understood as the care taken of the objects and subjects of individual and collective desire* – including the *care taken of children*. As I have argued in *Constituer l'Europe 1. Dans un monde sans vergogne*, industrial populism leads to the destruction of all shame (*aidos*), that is, to the liquidation of all sublimation and all super-egoization: all *law* and, therefore, all *justice*. This populism then reigns, along with cynicism and a transgressive acting out that, animated by a pure death drive, fails to lead to any transindividuation, or to any possibility of sublimation – except in the frightening form that I call, notably in relation to the behaviour of terrorists, *negative sublimation* (of which Freud tentatively initiated an analysis).

The loss of the spirit of capitalism, and the spiritual misery to which it leads, can only engender the development of a society that is profoundly *irrational*, in the sense that reason has disappeared as the *motive of hope*, as the kingdom of ends. *Absolute* disenchantment is the *disappearance of every horizon of expectation*, and of all belief, whether religious, political or *libidinal*, which is also to say, filial and social, constituting as such that fabric of solidarities necessary for any society – which Aristotle named *philia*. This absolute disenchantment afflicts in particular all those who *no longer have anything to expect* from the development of hyper-industrial society – and such people are becoming *more and more numerous*.

Now, no longer having anything to expect also means no longer having anything to fear, something already indicated by the Greek word, *elpis*: expectation, which bears within it the sense of both hope and fear. With desperation comes a lack of fear – and the proliferation of repressive mechanisms intended to cope with the effects of this *loss of authority that is also a loss of spirit* turns out to be less and less effective and, ultimately, to increasingly engender *the opposite* of that for which they were intended, in extreme and totally irrational forms. This is the point at which we have arrived, and it is *very bad news*: the *hyper-power* of the technical system of the hyper-industrial epoch can only maintain its

power for as long as everyday, blind trust [*confidence*] remains possible, a trust inevitably ruined by the destructive irrationality resulting from the liquidation of the kingdom of ends. Now, trust is a *precondition* of the functioning of hyper-power: from the moment trust is lost, hyper-power is inverted into hyper-vulnerability and impotence. The loss of motives of hope then spreads, encompassing *all* of us like a contagious illness. But this '*all*' is no longer a *we*: it is a panic.

The loss of all expectation [*attente*] is, moreover, what in the first place engenders industrial populism, through the *destruction of attention itself*. Industrial populism exploits control technologies, and in the first place television, as Gilles Deleuze made clear during an exchange with Serge Daney. I try to show in this work that *the control of attention inevitably induces the uncontrollable* because it is above all the control of what Freud analysed as the processes of primary and secondary identification. It is through these processes that a psyche, that is, a psychic individuation, is constituted, a psychic individuation that, as a result of secondary identifications (themselves forming secondary retentions), is also a collective individuation. The process of primary identification – which was placed, even quite recently, under the authority of the parental *imago*, and, through the intermediary of parenthood, of revenances weaving a heritage of spirit, and as its spirits and hauntings – has to a large extent ceded control to the flux of industrial temporal objects and, in particular, those of television. Now, this situation ruinously over-determines all those processes of secondary identification through which the psyche is woven – a ruin that results in the reign of spiritual misery.

Controlling primary and secondary identification leads to psychic disidentification, which in turn leads to a process of collective disindividuation, that is, to a destruction of the social body itself, and engenders disaffected psychic and social individuals. It does so in a dual sense: it engenders their *disaffection* [*désaffection*], ruining their affective capacities; and it engenders their *withdrawal* [*désaffectation*], the loss of their place, that is, of their *ethos*. For this amounts to the question of ethics: ethics, which is the knowledge of the *abode* [*séjour*]. Ethics, as the translation of the Greek word *ethos*, is that which gives me my *place* within the *circuit of affects* through which the process of psychic and collective individuation constitutes itself. Insofar as it establishes such places, ethics is also what weaves that process of transmission linking together the succession of generations.

Notes

1. *Translator's note*: *Esprit* in French refers both to mind and spirit. At times one or other of these terms fits better, but mostly Stiegler's use of this term implies both these senses. It should be added that 'spirit' here, however, is not meant in any vaporously 'spiritual' sense, as he makes clear in the remainder of the paragraph.

2. On this point, see my commentaries in *De la misère symbolique 1. L'époque hyperindustrielle* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), and in *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

3. Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, pp. 62–64 and pp. 103–7.

4. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).