Bernard Stiegler, 1952-2020

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The death of Bernard Stiegler in August, aged 68, will surely be met by a glut of biographies documenting a far from conventional philosophical eccentric. It is undeniable that he could be difficult, and not just because of the density of his prose and tendency to write exclusively in neologisms; but he could also be extraordinarily hospitable and at ease with others from all walks of life, not least, perhaps, because he had walked so many lives himself. Both of his grandfathers were German immigrants. One raced cars. His father, Robert, was a self-taught television engineer, among the first of his kind. Stiegler's childhood was mostly spent in Sarcelles, at a time when the village quadrupled in size, transitioning from a sleepy rural backwater to a multicultural satellite of rapidly modernising Paris. He grew up, in other words, at the outset of what he would later theorise as a period of profound technological and social disruption – the 'age of acceleration' spanning from the ever-expanding world of the car, plane and rocket, to the shrinking, retreating, microspheres of the pocket screen.

The turbulence of postwar France left its mark on him. A hardline sixteen-year-old communist who dropped out of school around May '68, he would come to depict the protests as individualistic and lifestyle-oriented. The first great symptom of hyperindustrial decadence: consumerism dissolving the social super-ego that served as a precondition of the very desire that the protesters sought to unleash. His own post-'68 drifting matched his later diagnosis of an era slipping into nihilism, occasioned by the relentlessly disadjusting rapidity of change. Glimpses of this period are offered up in the unusually autobiographical *Age of Disruption* (2016), which recounts how he fantasised about becoming a saxophonist, novelist or poet, but stumbled over having nothing to say. At the age of nineteen he fathered a child – the philosopher Barbara Stiegler – and suffered a psychotic break after being sent to a psychiatric hospital, due to alcoholism, from which he hitchhiked an escape after meeting a patient so institutionalised that they could not leave. He was homeless and living in a car when a farmer took pity on him and gave him land. There Stiegler raised goats and a pet monkey, Zoë, who swung freely through the trees until she got jealous of his first wife and took to attacking her. When drought killed off the farm he transformed a brothel into a jazz club, one frequented by his first philosophical mentor Gérard Granel, until the police drove him out of business following his refusal to turn informer on local mobsters using his premises to sell heroin. Famously, Stiegler then turned to robbing banks, before getting caught on his fourth go. During a five-year stint in prison he went on hunger strike, turning his teeth black, until he was granted a single-occupancy cell where he became obsessed with the image of four-dimensional spirals and read Mallarmé and Husserl in silence, seeing confinement as a real-life version of the phenomenological *epokhē*. He had once been funny, he would later reflect, but prison put an end to that. Henceforth, although still capable of considerable humour, he bore the weight of the world and became a centre of gravity, a point around which others would rotate. His incarceration only became public in a 2003 talk, 'How I Became a Philosopher', published in *Acting Out* and given just as he rose to superstardom. There, Stiegler recalled that, amidst enforced solitude, he saw how, in stripping away the outside, prison also strips out interiority, forcing us to begin rebuilding a world, and by extension, a self, from scratch. He reiterated the message in interviews given during Covid-induced lockdown, and was a pliant prisoner now, as then – a model convert who, upon his release in 1983, declined involvement with Michel Foucault's reform movement, the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons*.

Granel saw in Stielger incipient genius, not to mention the significance of the spiral – '*voilà c'est ça, ta philosophie!*' – distance-supervising a first thesis on Plato and Marx as thinkers of technology, before steering Stiegler towards Derrida and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales for a PhD. *The Fault of Epimetheus* was submitted in 1993 and published a year later as Volume One of the *Technics and Time* series. It was here that Stiegler laid out his philosophical stall, combining Greek mythology and Husserlian phenomenology with Heidegger, Derrida, biology, the history of technology, the paleoanthropology of André Leroi-Gourhan and the transductive relations of Gilbert Simondon, to argue that humans – whom he would later claim are only ever 'intermittently *not* inhuman' – only exist, or rather 'consist', through technics. By this time, he had married Derrida's other *protégée*, Catherine Malabou, whom he continued to describe as the 'most *brilliant* philosopher' long after their divorce, and passed through the Collège international de philosophie, on his way to the Université de technologie de Compiègne, where he stayed, albeit minimally, alongside recurring professorial stints at Goldsmiths and later Nanjing, until his retirement in 2018. He had mooted the plan of continuing to work in the United States, using the salaries on offer to subsidise his many other projects. The robberies, however, returned to haunt him in the Trump era: despite his criminal record having been expunged, he was blocked from a spell at Brown planned for the same year.

Derrida's philosophy of the trace described how earlier terms in a series are retroactively constituted and thereby also transformed by their subsequent and future iterations. Stiegler thought his friend and mentor equivocated on whether traces operated within nature, and not just in the structures of writing that deconstruction analysed. Derrida was similarly unpersuaded that a driver might 'read' and 'write' a car, or a musician an instrument, in the way that an author would a book. In addition to the random, mutating, iterations of Darwinian evolution, which change the way we read the history of a given organism, Stiegler proposed that we should also recognise how technical objects transform the bodies of their users. The *Fault of Epimetheus* refers to the Titan who forgot to give people qualities, thereby necessitating our constitution through technics, understood as a supplement that both conditions and makes impossible the very sub-

jects it brings into existence. The book goes on to recast Derridean *différance* as a theory of the reciprocal reinvention, or 'co-individuation', of the 'what' and the 'who', the tool and the tool-user. The *who* invents the *what*, which in turn reinvents the who, transforming the interiority of the subject – the experience of time as memory and anticipation, attention, desire and knowledge – whose increased mastery of the tool means that it, too, can be reinvented, and so on. This is Stiegler's image of the spiral, oscillating between tool and user as it projects forward in time, anticipating the future in a *potentially* never-ending process of mutual refinement. Nowadays, however, that potential is largely unrealised, on account of what Stiegler theorised, reworking Marx, as 'proletarianisation': the externalisation of know-how and life skills (*savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre*) into machines without there being any corresponding re-internalisation of knowledge on the part of users, who find themselves henceforth reduced to the vitiating passivity of consumption without production. It is not just labour that is nowadays proletarianised, but also desire and thought, which are increasingly automated by marketing and the algorithms that make decisions for us, he argued, most notably in *The Automatic Society, 1: The Future of Work* (2015).

Stiegler's politics started to come to the fore in the second and third volumes of *Technics and Time: Disorientation* (1996) and *The Time of Cinema and the Question of Ill-Being* (2001). The latter has been described by his friend and fellow-traveller Jean-Hugues Barthélémy as Stiegler's *magnum opus*, marking the transition from the 'philosophical anthropo(techno)logy' of his earlier work to what was, *per* the title of a book from 2009, a 'new critique of a political economy'. The two later volumes are marked by an emerging activism, signaling the birth of a project rooted in what Barthélémy calls the methodology of '*prolongement-dépassement*', or extension that also goes beyond.

Stiegler went beyond deconstruction by extending Derrida into technics, psychoanalysis and 'libidinal economy', but also because, over and above just breaking down our relationship with technology, he sought to 're-compose' it. The future is not just already out there, waiting to come, but must actively be created if we are to avoid the entropy of mere 'becoming'. Stiegler's way of doing this was to campaign for an inversion of the economic model that allows market-produced technologies to de-

termine who we get to be, in favour of developing tools of 'de-proletarianisation' that would allow us to contribute to constructing the world and people we would like to see. Creating 'an industrial policy of technologies of the spirit', and later an 'economy of contribution', were the stated manifesto goals of Ars Industrialis, the think-tank-cum-lobby-group-cum-charity Stiegler co-founded in 2005 with others including his third wife Caroline Stiegler (née Fayat), then a legal advisor to his literary agent, now a judge. The birth of Ars Industrialis went hand in hand with Stiegler's founding (with Vincent Puig) of the *Institut de recherche et d'innovation* (IRI), following his directorship of several other centres designed to bridge industrial and academic research: Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA), Pierre Boulez's Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique (IRCAM) and the Department of Cultural Development at the Centre Pompidou. Also based at the Pompidou, IRI ultimately became independent and remained the principal hub of Stiegler's activities up until his death.

These institutional inventions came in the middle of an astonishingly prolific period of writing during which Stiegler wrote or lead-authored over twenty books, including multiple series, in the seven years between 2003 and 2010. Among the most important works of these years are the triple-volumed *Disbelief and Discredit* (2004-6) and double-volumed *Symbolic Misery* (2004, 2005), both of which drew heavily on Freud to revisit the fate of desire under consumerism. The problem, Stiegler now argued, is that consumerist technologies, surrounded by marketing, the user lock-in of warranties and guarantees, and built-in obsolescence, make us (the *who*) without enabling us to make them (the *what*) in return. The average iPhone addict cannot pull off its back and tamper with the black box of smartphone technology to come up with alternative modes of use. We no longer get the feeling of self-worth ('primordial narcissism') that comes from using technics to shape the world, and by extension ourselves. The result is a prevailing feeling of nothingness and despair that is common also to terrorists – desperate to perform the sublime they cannot feel – and those seduced by the return of the extreme right.

In his middle (libidinal economic or 'general organological') period of work, *différance* became the '*différance* of pleasure', with desire 'sublimated' into existence through the deferral of satisfaction, which is itself regulated by the social organisations that govern our adoption of technology. When society tells us to consume without limits, that process of deferral and anticipation never happens, giving way to 'drive-based', compulsive behaviours. We are automated by prescribed habits to crave the next dopamine buzz. Here is where Stiegler differs from Deleuze and Guattari: desire is not just out there, 'natural', and revolutionary, kept castrated by its reduction, by capitalism, to impotent fantasy. It has to be nurtured and created. It is fragile and can collapse.

'General organology' names what Stiegler saw as the new discipline of thinking biology ('physiological', or, later, 'endosomatic' organs) and technics ('artifactual', later 'exosomatic', organs) alongside social organisation, which regulates our interactions with technologies, by prescribing limits on when we use them, and for what. Understood as 'digital studies' – also the name of the international research network Stiegler founded in 2012 – cultural history becomes the study of the transformations of thought and experience opened up when bodies are 'grammatised', or 'de- and re-functionalised', by revolutions in the technical systems that organise society – from knapped flints and cave paintings to writing, printing and, ultimately, the digital. By the time of *What Makes Life Worth Living* (2010), the Platonic-Derridean concept of the *pharmakon*, a simultaneous remedy and poison, had taken centre stage in the presentation of this argument. Just as the smartphone frees up time and eliminates space while also weakening memory and detaching us from our immediate surroundings, Stiegler argued, all technologies are both curative and toxic, opening up and closing down possibility. Regimes of politics and libidinal economy are differentiated by whether they reign in the toxic side, or whether, like late capitalism, they cultivate it by eliminating constraints and failing to develop new educational norms.

The question of education preoccupied Stiegler between *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2008) and *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century* (2012), which picked up on the relationship between screen exposure and attention deficit disorders. To some this confirmed the impression of Stiegler as a bit of a panic-merchant, yet accusations of Luddism routinely fail to account for his work on creating alternatives: to experiment, for example, with the possibilities of digital education. He hated the attritional consumerism

of MOOCS, but was among the first to pioneer smaller-scale digital teaching. IRI developed digital distance participation tools for annotating and categorising film and text, which Stiegler put to use in his own doctoral seminars from 2010. When plans to turn Caroline's family home in Épineuil-le-Fleuriel into a school proved too ambitious, he settled for a summer school, launched in 2011 via his website, Pharmakon.fr. For several years as many as eighty-odd visitors would camp and eat for free (or rather, pay voluntary contributions) around his beloved medieval millpond, while up to two thousand followed from afar. Participants would sit with minimal breaks through gruelling ten-hour days of philosophical discussion capped by evening sessions on experimental art, all in Stiegler's disused concrete barn. The debates were often explosive. In 2016, for instance, Stiegler bawled out visitors from the popular student-led movement *Nuit debout*, then busy protesting reforms to French employment law. He accused them of 'lacking gravity', standing around doing nothing, because they were not actively involved in the creation of new knowledge.

For all its toxicity, he insisted, neoliberalism had succeeded because the knowledge it created had been therapeutic – at least to some, if only for a while. In so arguing, he alienated his guests but hinted at the central concept of his final monographic series, *Qu'appelle-t-on penser?*, a pun on Heidegger's *What Is Called Thinking?*, where *penser* (thinking) is inseparable from salving (*panser*). The problem with contemporary knowledge-production is not just that academics are proletarianised and unable to understand the import of the technologies on which they rely to make their claims, but that knowledge, subject to profit motives and hyper-specialisation, has become divorced from its original, 'negentropic', 'anti-entropic', function of enabling us to live better. The references to thermodynamics had been there, lurking, from the start, but now pointed to Stiegler's main focus, thanks to the major late influences of the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and the biologist Alfred Lotka. After Stiegler's first, foundational, discovery of the technical constitution of 'noetic', 'exosomatic' (intermittently not inhuman) life, he held that his second great contribution

to philosophy was to grasp how we employ technics to defer entropic collapse. That collapse is now staring us in the face in the form of the 'Entropocene'. If fake news and climate-change-disavowal have gained traction, it is only because they do more to salve than the academic abstractions that currently pass for truth.

Stiegler's summer school was discontinued in 2017, partly because of his annoyance at the rise of 'philosophical tourists' but mostly so he could focus instead on his next project, the 'experimental learning territory of Plaine commune', set up in Seine-Saint-Denis in conjunction with national and local government and a range of corporate investors. The aim of Plaine Commune was to take one of the most deprived and multicultural areas of France, considered to be particularly susceptible to the disruptive automation of employment, and engage its citizens in using digital tools for urban regeneration and the creation of 'negentropic localities'. For all Stiegler's relentlessness and in spite of subsequent success, the project was initially beset by funding issues, court cases, political opportunism and the half-hearted participation of municipalities the project sought to serve.

The fire in an increasingly exhausted Stiegler was starting to flicker. He considered *The Automatic Society, 1* to be his most important work – aside from that which would appear just before his death, *Bifurquer: Il n'y a pas d'alternative* (2020) – and laboured on a sequel that just would not come. As his output slowed, so the number of promised titles increased. Substantial drafts of *Technics and Time 4, Symbols and Diabols*, were in private circulation by 2004, but it was never released because it grew into volume 5, *Le Défaut qu'il faut*, which needed a prequel to fill in gaps in the argument. By 2018, *Le Défaut qu'il faut* had been pushed back to volume 7 – one of ten or so books, or fragments of books, which might make up his archive, including volume 2 of *The Automatic Society*, volume 4 of *Disbelief and Discredit*, two volumes on aesthetics, *De la mystagogie*, originally scheduled for publication around 2011, and a third volume of *Qu'appelle-t-on panser?*

Back in 2016, it took the unexpected *Age of Disruption*, subtitled 'How not to go mad?' in the original French, to break the writing deadlock. The book saw the philosopher open up about his experience of depression and the fundamental role he accorded to writing as a form of self-therapy – a clue, perhaps, as to why he can read to others as though writing primarily for himself. He also

waded in on the epidemic of suicides afflicting all ends of society, from the abandonment of the *banlieues* to the hopeless youth and jaded disruptors of wealthy Palo Alto. He would ultimately return to this thought via Arnold Toynbee: a society 'always dies from suicide or murder – and nearly always from the former'.

The final flurry of Stiegler's work combined negentropic locality with the need to avert this suicide, both individual and civilisational. In December 2019, Ars Industrialis was relaunched as the Association of Friends of the Thunberg Generation, in coalition with the French wings of Youth for Climate and Extinction Rebellion, to fight for the dream of a 'Neganthropocene'. And, this summer, the work he oversaw and co-authored with the Internation Collective was published – *Bifurquer* (*Bifuricate: There is No Alternative*). The former had long been in the offing. Ars Industrialis was well down on its peak membership of over 40,000 and relied on Stiegler's royalties for revenue. The insuperable rise of big tech meant that its mission, and the free software movement to which it had hitched itself, had failed in Stiegler's eyes, and his energies were now more focused on the planet. *Bifurquer* had begun life in September 2018 at the Serpentine Gallery's 'Work Marathon', and was intended as a follow-up to the 'Scientists' Final Warning' on climate change of earlier that year, bringing together over fifty researchers from across the disciplines to lay out the theoretical groundwork for how contributive economic neganthropy might take off. A draft was presented to the United Nations on the hundredth anniversary of its foundation in January 2020, with publication following in July, after monumental editorial efforts that included a near-fatal bout of sepsis. He wound down in hospital with a bit of light work, drafting multiple proposals for a global 'Network of Ecologically Smart Territories' (NEST), including the Galapagos, which he planned to launch on return from what proved to be his last family holiday in Corsica. Of *Bifurquer*, Stiegler euphorically insisted, 'It's the best book I have ever read!' By his own definition it was a 'miracle', a hitherto impossible bifurcation able to provide hope in the face of 'absolute nihilism'.

The man whose list of institutions pointed to a longing for collectivity ever since the disappointments of May '68 had finally, he hoped, made a group to succeed him.

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