

Boom Boom

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I BLAME THE BOOMERS FOR THE STATE WE'RE IN. Why? Because the boom time of the post-war boomers was also the blossoming of what Martin Heidegger called 'the planetary reign of technology' (see Heidegger). To put this another way, the period saw the unprecedented convergence of a range of emergent biopolitical techniques. This convergence has had innumerable and irreversible consequences globally, as the reasons for such a shift have also found innumerable expositors. As Simon During puts it:

Why is social capitalism being replaced by neo-liberalism? Primarily for economic reasons, indeed so much so that political and cultural accounts of this shift have limited cogency... It is also important to recognise that neo-liberalism belongs to a process in which, for the first time in history, capitalist profits are being distributed across the globe so as to increase income in many previously impoverished parts of the world in a process that is also in the interests of global social justice.

'Primarily for economic reasons': this is at once uncontroversial, incontrovertible and obscure. It is uncontroversial, because it would be difficult to find anyone from anywhere across the political or cultural spectrum who would disagree. (Who, today, is not a vulgar Marxist?) It is incontrovertible, because all rational indicators point to the priority of the economy. Yet it is also obscure, since

‘economic reasons’ cover a multitude of sins. What follows are a handful of Foucauldian-inflected suggestions to complicate During’s story, essentially variations on the themes of biopolitics, power-knowledge relations, and institutional mutations.

First, the post-War triumph of post-Taylorist management strategies at the heart of big-business organisations, which drew on a range of psychological and biophysical theories to ram home their efficiency messages. Think here of the work of Peter Drucker (the coiner of the term ‘knowledge worker’ in the late 1950s), Edward Bernays (yes, Freud’s nephew), and Elliott Jaques (inventor of the category of the ‘mid-life crisis’ and the theory of ‘requisite organisation’). Under this rubric, we should also mention coeval military developments in operant conditioning and accompanying colonialist adventures in shock therapy (see Grossman; Klein). We should also note how such developments, whether knowingly or not, refined and intensified techniques drawn from colonial slave plantations, a phenomenon that recently resurfaced again in the much-spruiked research of Caitlin Rosenthal.¹ Yet it is with the boomers that management as such becomes an ur-discipline of all and any form of organisation, a study of abstract techniques able in principle to be injected into any collective whatsoever.²

Second, we should mention the post-war research into genetics, biochemistry, psychopharmacology and neuroscience: a massive explosion of the life-sciences as such, developing the powers to intervene directly into the so-called ‘building blocks’ of life itself. To take up only one thread of these developments, it is worth referring to David Healy and others on the development of Big Pharma: it is by way of the medical alibi that consumerism came to be directly linked to highly-specialised scientific research. This development has today achieved a total

¹ It is surely striking that it is not the literature or history professors, but the corporates themselves who seem to have shown immediate keen interest in such research (for example, Rosenthal; Johnston).

² If there are a number of significant differences between ‘institutions’, ‘firms’, ‘companies’, ‘corporations’, etc., that should not be missed in any account of these developments, these unfortunately can’t be effectively marked here. The contingencies of this history are of the greatest importance. However, I think the essentials of my argument are clear (and justifiable): what these developments have been directed towards is precisely the *motivated reduction of all such local differences*, aggressively minimising any situational (biological, legal, cultural, social, political) variations that might inhibit the maximisation of profitability. Hence: abstract global techniques that maximise functional efficiencies by targeting the capital-labour relation, no matter the existing nature of the collective (i.e., whether public or private, large or small, commercial or supposedly non-profit, etc.). If you wanted an authoritative picture of this uneven development globally, you could do much worse than (the frankly amazing) Manuel Castells’ *The Rise of the Network Society*.

extension which irremediably corrupts the reliability of its own claims, as it simultaneously neutralises possibilities of resistance (See, *inter alia*, Healy; Stamatakis, Weiler and Ioannidis).

Third, we can adduce the well-known economic developments that During himself outlines: the abandonment of Bretton Woods, the OPEC crisis, the transformation of corporate losses into sovereign debt, the real time globalisation of financial markets alongside the development of new instruments such as derivatives, the concerted efforts of well-organised specific intellectuals to promulgate free market doctrines, etc.

But the crucial development that enabled the successful integrated convergence of manotech, biotech, and econotech was infotech. Information technology was itself given its decisive impetus in World War II, although its own preconditions lie elsewhere. These preconditions are at least double: first, the mathematisation of logic, from George Boole to Bertrand Russell; second, the extension and electrification of this mathematised logic by Alonzo Church, Alan Turing, Claude Shannon and others. Why? Because digital computing represents the realisation of—for the first time in human history—the universal machine (Ceruzzi 27). In other words, we now have machines that can become any other machine.

As a direct result of this double intrication, we are currently subjected to a barrage of new forms of post-disciplinary control made possible by the new post-convergent devices of distributed technology, and which are indispensable to the emergence and continuation of neoliberal economics. It is the fact of *universal post-convergence* through information technologies that—more than the radically new technical discoveries in themselves—constitutes the fundamental un-binding capacities of contemporary globalisation.

The German media theorist Gernot Böhme has given these developments the name of ‘invasive technification’. As he notes, not only do we live in a technological civilisation, but one in which ‘the resources that Europe [only Europe?] has historically had at its disposal for coping with technological progress are themselves being slowly destroyed’ (221). Take the smart phone or tablet, with which an ever-growing number of persons now spend more time than with another human. You pay for this device in many ways: for the device itself, for the subscription to the service, through taxation, and through other means. You pay for your own use of your device to be harvested and sold back to you, from the advertising that attracts your attention on every webpage, to the traces of your browsing history, to the networks into which you are integrated.

But you are also paying—and playing—with *de facto* cognitive modifications. These devices significantly invest and transform all sorts of micro-behavioural

elements, affecting attention-span, memory, response-time, not to mention the very terms and conditions of communication itself. Moreover, these new devices don't just converge all prior media within themselves—radicalising Marshall McLuhan's famous analyses of the fact that every new medium has prior media as its content (McLuhan and Fiore 71)—but enable the actualisation of a real convergence between management, military and financial institutions. The smart phone is merely the edge of the approaching silicon-berg that is the 'internet of things', in which your fridge, your toaster, and your car—perhaps even your baby's nappies—will be reporting back to the manufacturer, the service-provider, your insurance-provider and most probably to secret state organisations in real time.

The key here is that all economic and financial practices are now integrally informatic, and as such necessarily expropriative, even if by means of the alibi of new forms of voluntary servitude: one must pay in a number of ways in order to accomplish the slightest action. The separation between economy and language has now been sealed by new media—at the concomitant cost of separating humans from their own language-use, the feature long considered by philosophy to be their essence. If almost all inherited elements of human communication have now been decisively reconfigured by the new technologies, this is on the basis of essentially technical, trans-human routines of 'information-as-code' not 'language-as-symbolic-exchange'. In other words, human language-use has itself become a subset of informatics, not a constitutive horizon of understanding. 'Social Media' are nothing of the kind; they would be much better considered under the heading of 'Asocial Media', insofar as all possible communications must run through the exteriority of the platform itself. This technicisation of communication is tantamount to an externalisation and expropriation of the cognitive faculties themselves.

Aside from anything else, the technical, managerial and chemical interventions characteristic of such a 'society' not only utterly transform experience and behaviour, but the possibility of experience and behaviour in general. Indeed, the word 'society' itself should probably now be retired, given that a technically-networked globe has nothing whatsoever to do with anything resembling any traditional form of society. To repurpose Alain Badiou's description of the operations of the power-set in ZFC set theory to speak of the paradox of the contemporary organisational powers of new media or this meta-structuring by technics: *'the State is not founded upon the social bond, which it would express, but rather upon un-binding, which it prohibits'* (Badiou 109, italics in original). Statist modes of binding include those machine operations upon massive aggregations of data-sets—'gathering, sorting, ordering, and searching', as Adrian Mackenzie puts it—that exacerbate and qualitatively transform all prior forms of classification. The power of these classifications is that they drill down with the

most micrological attentiveness into previously-invisible or unattainable zones of everyday life (for example, the asocial functionings of your own biology), as they articulate the data thereby gained with other unimaginably immense sets of data (for example, the asocial transactions of global financial markets).

Under such conditions, 'the university' is itself finally entirely restructured according to the deracinated managerial techniques that are now *de rigueur* for any multinational corporation, and which dramatically exploit the surveillance capacities of the new media. Such corporations are essentially gargantuan curatorial enterprises: centralised, hierarchical, and unilateral at the organisational level, yet diverse, flexible, and mobile at the service level. Their one and only motivation is the maximisation not of profit *per se*, but of *profitability*: the shift from modernity to postmodernity also effects a redistribution of modal categories, from the priority of actuality to the demands of virtuality. If you'll pardon the Hegelian parody: in the night of this restructuring, all institutions go black.

The consequences for all received cultural and biological distinctions are serious. On the one hand, there is no phenomenon whatsoever that now cannot find a place, however big or small, in a levelled 'field of cultural production'. On the other hand, all phenomena, in this very flattening, are essentially subject to consumer preferences. Hence the ancient symbolic professions—notably the academic humanities disciplines—are now subjected to the doublet of managerialism and crowdsourcing at every scale. Every cultural product is now accompanied by its hobby sites enabled by our vast data-capitalist corporations, modulating any expressed spontaneous affective investments into deskilled unremunerated labour. All culturally-oriented-and-based academic disciplines simultaneously experience a legitimation crisis. You like Thomas Pynchon, I like Jane Austen, s/he likes Phantom comics, they like Nazi pamphlets, we all love death metal: there's absolutely no rational way to justify a collective hierarchy of preferences in such a situation, other than numbers.

So one can now confirm that Cultural Studies was itself the harbinger of neoliberalism in the university humanities. Symptomatically split between its pseudo-radical anti-canonical symbolic affirmations of marginality on the one side, and the wannabe policy wonks on the other, this anti-discipline is probably now best considered as, depending on your personal preferences of course, a Janus-faced Spartacus or a Dr Dolittlean Pushmi-Pullyu. Simultaneously affirming your right to party and the right of the state to manage your party, the boomers who led the cultural studies assault have proven enthusiastic and effective grave-diggers for their own progenitors. Partially as a result, if it indeed survives at all, education in the humanities will soon be nothing more than, as J.-

F. Lyotard just about predicted in the late 1970s, teaching the kids how better to use their social media platforms (see Lyotard).

In 1995, Immanuel Wallerstein published a collection of essays under the title *After Liberalism*. On his own account, his work is motivated by two fundamental principles: first, that the world-system should be the fundamental frame of reference; second, that all analyses should be at once systematic and historical. For Wallerstein, capitalism as a 'world-system' has now entered its unstable endgame, and will be unable to re-establish equilibrium. In dynamical systems theory, bifurcations permit the system to modulate between different states, shifting or creating periodicities, stable or unstable: 'while bifurcations can either affect existing periodicities or create new ones, chaos occurs at the limit of an infinite cascade of bifurcations' (Kolen 71). In Wallerstein's prescient words: 'The period from 1990 to 2025/2050 will most likely be short on peace, short on stability, and short on legitimacy' (Wallerstein 25). In a word: chaos.

Just as neoliberalism marks the total triumph of capitalism, it just as surely marks its end. In such an optic, the 'precariat' is one epiphenomenon of this systemic collapse. Yet it is not the only one, nor even a privileged one. Moreover, in the analyses offered by Simon During as well as by Guy Standing, the emphasis on 'precarity' itself somewhat occludes some of the key transformations wreaked by the new techno-financial operations of 'endgame capitalism'. Nonetheless, it's suggestive that Standing concludes with Martin Niemöller's famous poem:

They came first for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me
and by that time no one was left to speak up.

(quoted in Standing 192)

Maybe it's not Brecht or Celan, but it makes its point. The poem proclaims the absolute necessity to maintain something that During dispenses with quickly and early: the problem of the enemy.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes: "'Brother,' 'sister,' 'comrade' are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie because in their thinking my brother is my wallet and my comrade, my scheming' (Fanon 11). This is exactly

the sort of discouragement that masters have always encouraged. Every relationship is ultimately based only on the self-interest of the human animal, which effectively renders 'equality' and 'liberty' fantasy words dissimulating their own *ressentiment* and reality. There can be no real friends or enemies in the realm of generalised competition, simply opportunistic transient groupings based on tactical considerations; all such tactical considerations have as their alpha and omega the god of economic growth. Any demurring analyses will be ideologically dismissed as anachronistic or irrelevant, if not flagrantly terroristic.

Yet it is a mathematised doctrine of the enemy that is at the very centre of the developments listed above. As Peter Galison writes: 'it was on the agonistic field that [Norbert] Wiener, [John] von Neumann, and the operational analysts were most at home. Formally, militarily, and philosophically, theirs was a universe of confrontation between opponents' (258). Many other commentators have also emphasised that the logic of our universal machines is not a natural logic, but a military one. In other words, not only does the 'friend/enemy' bifurcation take us a long way: it's the only way. Yet it cannot *simply* take the form of blaming particular groups, such as the 1%. It will have to take a form that is properly philosophical or properly poetic. Why? These discourses emerge only insofar as they evade the contemporaneous equations of effective action with operatory or calculatory routines, by squirreling-out and testifying to different kinds of impredicatives or insolubles that are at once part of the situation yet cannot be resolved within it.³

On the basis of the remarks above, then, I hazard the following propositions:

- cultural analyses are today exhausted primarily due to the operations of new media;
- new media enable a fusion of the economic and symbolic through exteriorising and expropriating all communication as informatics;
- to remain viable, political analyses must be separated from cultural analyses;

³ Hence the rampant global popularity of a revived and militant philosophy today: philosophy, which predates and in fact recurrently refounds new forms of the academy as such (and not just the modern post-Wordsworthian or post-Berlin university), is back in the form of outrageous speculative logics. The greatest contemporary representative of this self-conscious trend is the French thinker Alain Badiou, who has now accordingly written not one, but two *Manifestos for Philosophy*.

- all and any political analyses must retain the friend/enemy distinction as a condition of their being ‘political’ at all;
- the friend/enemy distinction must be refounded according to categories that do not simply look to apportion blame along received cultural/personal (predicative) lines;
- this refoundation must take place along new conceptual-practical lines (emerging from philosophy or poetry and incorporating logic, mathematics, technics, etc.).

Politics is a practice in which action cannot be separated from thought, and which cannot be separated from a thought of the enemy without dissolution. This doesn’t mean that the enemy is immediately identifiable; it does mean that the enemy will have to be flushed out in the course of a political process.

After all that, then, maybe it isn’t *entirely* the boomers’ fault—but I’m going to hold them partially responsible anyway.

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