

**‘We have to become the quasi-cause of nothing – of *nihil*.’
An interview with Bernard Stiegler**

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Abstract

This interview with the philosopher Bernard Stiegler was conducted in Paris on 28 January 2015, and first appeared in Dutch translation in the journal *Deuil van Minerva*. The conversation begins by discussing the fundamental place occupied by the concept of ‘technics’ in Stiegler’s work, and how the ‘constitutivity’ of technics does and does not relate to Kant and Husserl. Stiegler is then asked about his relationship with Deleuze, and he responds by focusing on the concept of quasi-causality, but also by arguing that there is a certain trajectory in Deleuze’s thought, situating his own philosophy in relation to its various moments. Stiegler is then asked to respond to the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks carried out three weeks prior to the interview. After making a couple of precautionary remarks, Stiegler relates such occurrences to the problem of what he calls ‘spiritual poverty’, to the intensification of ‘negative sublimation’ that can occur when there is a disconnection between the generations, and more generally to the growth of nihilism. All of these phenomena relate to the exploitation of technology by a virulent capitalism that irrationally believes that only the market is rational. After consideration of the complex historical relationship between Islam and modernization, and of both of these to Nietzsche’s ‘death of God’, and after recalling the destructive role played by the West in the rise of fundamentalism and jihadism, Stiegler concludes by reflecting on the fact that, ultimately, ‘intellectuals’ have failed to use technologies in ways that produce alternatives to consumerism.

Keywords

Deleuze, Islam, philosophy, technics, terrorism

Introduction

The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler published the first volume of his series, *Technics and Time*, in 1994. The preface opens with two claims: that ‘technics’ is the horizon of all future to come, and that it is what philosophy has repressed throughout its history. The centrality of this term to Stiegler’s thought is thus established from the outset, in a way that resonates (in departing from it) with Heidegger’s claim that what philosophy has never thought is being itself. From this centrality of technics, however, it would be imprudent to conclude that Stiegler’s work belongs to the category ‘philosophy of technology’, still less that he is some kind of technological ‘determinist’. For Stiegler, ‘hominization’ can never be separated from ‘technicization’, the *who* and the *what* co-emerging in a relation of undecidable priority from what he refers to as an ‘originary default’ (1998: 121–2).

If this last concept has about it something of a Derridian ring, then this is no accident: Stiegler’s work enacts a kind of genealogy of *différance* even if it is simultaneously a profound critique (Ross, 2013). This connection between the two philosophies is only strengthened when, a dozen years later, Stiegler places Derrida’s reading of the *Phaedrus* at the centre of all his subsequent diagnoses and analyses of the evolving relationship between technology and capitalism. As Derrida emphasized, for Socrates the *pharmakon* referred to the technics of writing as bearing the dual characteristics of being an aid and a threat to memory. For the last decade, Stiegler has pursued a ‘pharmacological’ approach that extends the reading of the *pharmakon* to every artefact. The fundamental philosophico-political concept utilized in that approach has been ‘proletarianization’: whether it is the inscription of speech in writing, the inscription of the gestures of the hand in the machines of the industrial revolution, or the inscription of the sensible in the audiovisual technologies of consumerist capitalism, all of these represent pharmacological stages that each time inaugurate a new tendency towards the loss of knowledge. In the latter case, it is the industrial exploitation of this tendency that forms the heart of consumer capitalism.

What this also shows, however, is that Stiegler is very concerned with processes of becoming, which draws his thinking away from Derrida and back towards Heidegger and Simondon, but also towards Deleuze. Stiegler, we might say, gives a Deleuzian inflection to the Derridian distinction between *devenir* and *avenir*, but this also implies a confrontation with Deleuze's philosophy and with his politics: one of the great virtues of this interview is the opportunity it provides for Stiegler to clarify the manner in which he interprets this question via the concept of 'quasi-causality', which for Stiegler is always the quasi-causality of the *pharmakon* itself.

Another consequence of the quasi-Deleuzian tendency of Stiegler's recent thought is the confrontation with the question of nihilism, and of its relationship with capitalism. This concern is not new in Stiegler's thought (see Stiegler, 2011a), but Stiegler argues, in his reading of what Berns and Rouvroy (2013) have called (drawing on Foucault and Deleuze) 'algorithmic governmentality', that digitalization and high performance computing have accelerated the growth of this desert (Stiegler, 2016). Beyond Berns and Rouvroy, Stiegler emphasizes that what is at stake with this great computational acceleration is not just control, or surveillance, or rationalization: it is how these lead to the growth of *unreason* and stupidity (and in terms of the latter, too, Stiegler argues for Deleuze against Derrida – see Stiegler, 2015). Stiegler's technological analyses are therefore always also 'symptomatological' analyses (in the sense developed in Vignola, 2016): hence this unreason is a question not just of stupidity but of madness, which is also to say, of terror, and on all sides. In this interview, Stiegler begins to draw these threads together, in what perhaps amounts to the emergence of a new tendency in his thinking, in which what will be at stake, even if it is not here named, is *disruption* as such. The question of the future, today, is the question of the quasi-causal production of alternatives to this profoundly nihilistic situation.

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General organology

UM: Bernard Stiegler, you are the author of some thirty books, including the three volumes of *Technics and Time* (1998; 2009b; 2011b). This series is often considered your *magnum opus*. It is not surprising, then, that many people see you as a ‘philosopher of technics’ rather than of politics or science. Nevertheless, this description is a bit misleading. The question of technics, as you pose it, is not just a regional issue. Might we say about technics what Jean Laplanche said about sexuality in the psychoanalytic field¹: if not everything, technics is nevertheless present throughout the human field; it is coextensive with existence?

BS: I completely agree with this way of presenting things. And it is all the more interesting to me because the question of the status of sexuality in psychoanalysis is a subject of great importance to me, and one that I think must, precisely, be articulated with technics.

For fifteen years now, I have developed a proposition, both theoretical and practical, in terms of what I call a ‘general organology’. Many people understand general organology as the submission of everything to technics, which would thus be the object of this general organology. Currently I am trying to show that organology does not refer only to technics, but also and equally to organs and organizations. The noetic organs, those of the ‘noetic soul’, are not simply technical, and neither are organizations. But every *noetic* organ and every *noetic* organization is also *technical* – and organological in this sense, which means: not only organic, not only organizational.

Organology is a theory and a practice of the organization that encompasses all kinds of non-technical realities. This theory, although ‘general’, does not claim to absorb all theories. But all theories are concerned by it, and I have the weakness to believe that it concerns them all – because it is a discourse on the conditions of possibility and on the limits of theories, which is also to say, on the necessity of practice.

Rather than as a theory, and even though it is also ‘theoretical’, I present it as an *approach* – not even a method – as a way not only of posing questions, but of *letting oneself be put into question* (by technics, organs and organizations, combined and forming transductive relations) in order to confront what Deleuze called problems. This approach consists in saying: as soon as we investigate a dimension of humanity – economic, hermeneutic,

aesthetic, psychoanalytic and so on – we always discover technics somewhere. Technics *contaminates* the other dimensions of general organology.

If, for example, we wish to study the brain, the eye or the human finger, we can never do so without taking account of what accompanies this brain, this eye or this finger. The finger holds objects that are technical, and that it may itself have fabricated. The way it holds these objects is inscribed in a social organization that is neither technical nor biological, and that conditions it. Technics is therefore everywhere, yet nothing is ever reducible to technics. This is why I locate myself very well within the proposition by Laplanche (with which I am also in profound agreement with respect to psychoanalysis) and in the analogy that you draw.

The constitutivity of technics

UM: Technics is not simply any device or system we encounter in the world. Before being an object present to consciousness, technics *constitutes* this consciousness as such. How do you understand this word, ‘constitution’? Is it a reference to Kant, who made a distinction between the constitutive and the regulative?²

BS: The question of the relationship between the regulative and the constitutive is obviously immense – and forms the issue of the Kantian heritage and the ‘system of idealism’ between Schelling and Fichte. What I call consistences, which do not exist, as they overflow existence and in so doing project it beyond subsistence, are a way of reprising the concept of the regulative idea in Kant that I have placed at the heart of what I call the idiotext, and that I articulate with the phenomenological question of protention and with the Freudian question of desire. The regulative idea opens for philosophy a completely new and promising possibility. But to fully assume this, we must transform the status of the constitutive in Kant. I have tried to show in the third volume of *Technics and Time* (2011b) that the schematism in the first version of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is made possible by a fourth synthesis, a techno-logical synthesis, which is obviously totally incompatible with Kant.

The regulative idea (like the schematism) is conditioned by this fourth synthesis. This statement needs to be developed at a length beyond what I

can do here: I would like to think about it further. I do not want to make premature statements.

Technical constitutivity is not transcendental because that which is constituted can in fact become constituting – as well as destituting: this pharmacology is a philosophy of becoming and of its ‘différance’ such that, within this becoming, it opens a future (that is, a law or right), so that this constitutivity or condition of possibility is also a destitutive condition of impossibility (where the law can always regress into a new state of fact).

That which constitutes – technics – destitutes. Technics is at once and in the same gesture that which constitutes possibility and that which bars possibility. As such, it is what imposes upon us politics, ethics, aesthetics, religion – in short, everything that forms care, *Sorge, therapeia*. If, therefore, there is indeed constitutivity, it is not a transcendental constitutivity: it is also destitutive. It is an *a-transcendental* constitutivity. Technics still has the function that the transcendental had in Kant and Husserl – constitutivity – but it is no longer transcendental: it is originally empirical (and accidental). Nor is this ‘a-transcendental empiricism’, so to speak, Deleuzian. Deleuze and Guattari were never able to think the question of the artefact. In this respect, an entire segment of their thought remains on the side of Platonism.

The quasi-causality of Deleuze

UM: But with this idea of a paradoxical condition that is immanent and not transcendent, are you not very close to Deleuze?

BS: You are right – I am even becoming closer to Deleuze. And yet, I find a fundamental blockage in Deleuze, less in Guattari – but in him I find other problems. Guattari is perhaps more open, however, to this introduction of the organological into life. Deleuze is Bergsonian, and his Bergsonism is on this plane intractable.

What matters most to me in Deleuze is his idea of quasi-causality (1990; Stiegler, 2013a). It is a position with respect to life that consists in positing that what wounds me, what weakens me – if it does not kill me – is also my chance. My chance lies only there; it is not providence – transcendental or transcendent – that will save us. There is no salvation, and

it is not a question of being saved, but of being worthy. This is what is magnificent in Deleuze.

In fact, it is always a question of being worthy of technics – that is, of the accidental – including when it leaves me destitute. To be worthy of the strength that it gives me is pretty easy. But to be worthy of what it takes away from me is a true test. How this diminishing of myself can be transformed into an increase of me, this time no longer as *myself* but as *me-the-other*. This Deleuze is the Deleuze who interests me.

UM: So dignity has nothing to do with passivity, acceptance or resignation, but is on the contrary about action?

BS: Indeed, this is why it is not at all a *Gelassenheit*: this has to do with individuation and transformation, with what after Simondon I call ‘invention’. Deleuze opens up a ‘pharmacological’ perspective in *Difference and Repetition*, where he refers to repetition as ‘what we die from’ and as what ‘saves and heals’ – repetition as *pharmakon*.³ Subsequently, with Guattari, he will engage with all kinds of things that are no longer strictly Deleuzian and that go very far. And I believe that, by 1990, he realizes that he has gone a little too far: I believe that in the interview with Toni Negri on control societies, he becomes critical of what he and Guattari had opened up in *Anti-Oedipus*, *A Thousand Plateaus* and many other texts (Deleuze, 1995). I think he begins to take a little step back. He has aged, and he perhaps finds a little limited this kind of yes to the capitalist ‘desiring machine’, which had become more and more an attitude and less and less a thought.

I believe that he felt coming like none before him the first effects of ultra-liberalism. Deleuze is a political thinker. For the first time, he began to assert the negative, in a way. Starting from 1990, at the moment when he takes up the theme of the dividual that I believe comes from Guattari, he finds it hard to say yes and it is as if he feels coming what will be shown by Thomas Berns and Antoinette Rouvroy, namely, that the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari function perfectly well in and as what they call ‘algorithmic governmentality’ (Berns and Rouvroy, 2013), but that in so doing, they function in a way that is contrary to what Deleuze and Guattari expected (I myself comment in detail on Berns and Rouvroy’s commentary in *Automatic Society* [2016]).

This moment is, however, also the beginning of a wrong turn in Deleuze. He is no longer Deleuzian *enough* for my taste when he begins to

talk about resistance. Now, it is precisely when he begins to say, ‘there, there is the negative’, that we should not resist, but invent. To be worthy is not to be passive or resistant (that is, ‘reactive’ in the sense so often convoked by Deleuze), but to be inventive: it is to propose a new *agencement*, as Deleuze and Guattari say, which must be organological, that is, enabled by technical invention itself, and as the reality of repetition, from which we die and which saves.

What interests me is a kind of triangle between transcendental philosophy (Kant, Husserl, Heidegger’s existential analytic), the Derridian approach and Deleuzian quasi-causality. I try to create a thought for the twenty-first century with these three dimensions – plus psychoanalysis.

Spiritual poverty

UM: We would like to ask you some questions about recent events, including the terrorist attacks in Paris on 7 January 2015, and more generally on the acts of violence committed by Muslim fundamentalism around the world. Do you think that the attacks justified by reference to Islam can be understood as a critique vis-à-vis the ‘lifestyle’ propagated by neoliberal capitalism? Fundamentalists critique, for example, the materialism of Western culture, the absence of spiritual and family values, and so on. Can this criticism be understood as a critique of the lack of responsibility and care in the West?

BS: Before I give you my reply, I would like to make two remarks. Firstly, until now I have refused to be interviewed on this subject. Within the *Ars Industrialis*⁴ group, several people wanted, in the hours after the attacks, to open discussions. I opposed this. It was the first time I took such an authoritarian decision as president of *Ars Industrialis*. I argued in essence that even though I wanted messages to be circulated in order to make our positions known to each other, and of course that we express ourselves publicly as individuals, as a group I did not want us to take a position.

What occurred is of extraordinary gravity and it is absolutely fundamental to take the time to reflect. The media-terrorist system is created to produce emotion that prevents thinking (which is similar to what some call ‘functional stupidity’ [Alvesson and Spicer, 2012]). Responding to you will be the first time I have spoken on this subject – with, I hope, much

precaution, and in my own name. And I may say little apart from a few generalities that will rather be reminders.

Second remark: I do not believe that the attacks in Paris were committed by Muslim fundamentalists. When we refer to jihadists, the vast majority if not all of the cases are very recent converts who, moreover, are not always North African or African. Twenty-five per cent of jihadists in France are French of European origin. Some are not even from ghettoized *banlieues*, but from so-called '*la France désertée*', the devastated small towns where there is nothing to do, including Normandy and the coast of Brittany, such as the former seaman who is more than fifty and whose trial has just begun. These jihadists are not in general Muslims: they claim a phantasmatic adherence to Islam, but they have had no religious education. It is a kind of *claiming of spiritual identity*, sudden, exalted and extreme, that in general changes very quickly into ultra-violent processes that have nothing religious about them. This is not to say that there are no Muslims among these jihadists, but they are the exceptions. Nor is it to say that there are no groups in Muslim countries manipulating them.

Having made these two remarks, I am not saying there is no issue with Islam. But this is another question, even if we perhaps cannot completely separate these two issues. The issue with Islam is also an issue with fundamentalism in general, that is, with Jewish Israeli fundamentalism and with American evangelical fundamentalism, which may also be an Occidentalist fundamentalism (Catholic fundamentalism, in France, seems less vital, and Pope Francis seems to open a new epoch). The singularity of the conditions in which the question of fundamentalism arises, today, in all its many and varied forms (including secular fundamentalism), lies in what I have called 'spiritual poverty' (Stiegler, 2013b).

Since *Aimer, s'aimer, nous aimer* ('To Love, to Love Me, to Love Us: From September 11 to April 21', in Stiegler, 2009a), I have tried to analyse the various forms of noetic poverty – symbolic, affective, intellectual, spiritual, sexual, in brief: the misery and poverty that is based on the loss of the feeling of existing. When I published this book on Richard Durn, who was not a terrorist but a mass murderer, and who several weeks before the massacre professed his need to kill, I finished this analysis by saying: there are millions of Durns, and in the right conditions they will undertake the passage to the act. The behaviour of Durn, of those who committed the attacks in Madrid, of Anders Breivik in Norway, is above all criminal behaviour conducted by people who have become mad from the feeling of

not existing. [And since this interview, at this moment when I am re-reading and correcting the text, we have seen the pilot who drove an airliner into a mountain for no other reason than to take hundreds of lives in what is described as his suicide – but can such a description be sufficient?]

Negative sublimation

BS: Furthermore, this problem arises in a highly specific way in youth. Yesterday morning, there was a program on France Culture radio featuring a sociologist who had just published a book on the state of French youth. He spoke about a rate of suicide never reached before, and of a terrible widespread despair. A youth without professional future, even when it is over-qualified. No process of identification, not to its parents, not to any heroes, not to anything whatsoever. What can this end up producing, especially at the end of adolescence? It can produce what I call ‘negative sublimation’ (Stiegler, 2013b: 48). Negative sublimation always appears in adolescence, where there is always a negative moment, a moment of transgression, whether directed towards oneself (self-harm), or against conventions (growing long hair and so on), or at relatives (slamming the door, running away). To become adult is firstly to break away from norms – all this is banal. Anti-conformism is the very *soft* version of something that can nevertheless go further, and sometimes very far, for example, up to killing one’s father.

In normal adolescent development, this anti-conformism leads to the adolescent, faced with adults, presenting himself as being *ethically more correct*. He becomes the righter of wrongs. He turns to his father and asks him: ‘What did you yourself do during the war? Were you in the resistance? No, you were a collaborator. You were just like everyone else. You were just a sheep.’

There is always a moment when the adolescent begins to become this righter of wrongs, and thus to become adult, because he is in the course of figuring out what could be the position of an adult as the one who prescribes or will prescribe – for example, to his own children. If this righting of wrongs is not done through processes of positive identification to a figure alternative to the parents, this can only create complications.

Today, there is no figure with whom adolescence can positively identify. Who could identify with François Hollande? There remains the

Syrians, who are massacred by Assad and who are not sufficiently helped – and who the media sometimes present as resisters to the Assad regime, and as its victims, sometimes as Islamic State, as the devil, something systematically cultivated by this ‘state’: it is indeed quite diabolical. By doing this, you create an incomprehensible scene of negative identification, if I can put it like this, for a generation which has no experience, no religious education, no political education, if any education at all.

Disintegration

UM: Why do you say it has no education? Didn't it go to school?

BS: Three weeks before the attacks in Paris, I gave a lecture entitled ‘La désintégration’, in the theatre of the famous northern quartier of Marseilles (Stiegler, 2014).⁵ These are the poorest neighbourhoods in France: very high unemployment, violence, drugs and so on. My lecture was addressed to the population, including National Front voters, because I am convinced that, firstly, it serves no purpose to insult those who vote for the National Front, and furthermore, it is not the right thing to do politically. We need to offer political proposals instead of insults. I had decided not to speak about the National Front, nor about the violence in this quartier, but to take things from a more distanced perspective. So I spoke, among other things – but especially – about education.

Today, education is not working. Education, in the sense of public instruction, was conceived by Jules Ferry to satisfy two things.

Firstly, broadly speaking, it was a matter of fulfilling the program of Condorcet, that is, of establishing citizenship on the basis of a relative rationality of the behaviour of the citizen, and of acquiring this rationality through a frequentation of rational culture (mathematics, the sciences, as well as history, geography and literature subjected to critique, and so on).

Secondly, it was a matter of generating the feeling of belonging to the nation. You know the famous statement by Jules Ferry: ‘one is not born French, one becomes French’. This means that we can accommodate anyone in France, which guarantees that one who is not born French can become so. How does one become French? One does so, among other things, at school. School is a machine to produce individuation. But for this to work, it is necessary to have identification. And not only that: for there to

be identification, there needs to be idealization and sublimation. I myself am individuated as French even though I have German origins. My name is Stiegler; my maternal grandfather was called Trautmann. So I am not so French, but I identified myself with the Sans-culottes – that my ancestors may well have fought. As a child, I identified with all the characters of French history: Louis XIV, Robespierre, Napoleon. I am not at all a nationalist, but I am proud to be French. I love this history. I know it and I claim it. I say this because today this is no longer the case at all. These processes of identification no longer function.

Transindividuation through language

BS: One day, in a lecture, I referred to a Flemish mayor⁶ who became well-known because of his refusal to provide housing to people who could not speak Dutch. All the French newspapers, especially on the left, denounced this decision. As for myself, I tried to understand his position – which I believe first of all reflects the fact that we live in a society in which what I have called the process of the individuation of reference has disappeared (Stiegler, 2008: 112).

In the Middle Ages, in France, there were all kinds of local social groups constituted as such, in Brittany, Occitania, Provence, Savoie and so on. They are, generally speaking, counties or duchies that are more or less at war. There is no national unity. The process of collective individuation occurs at different levels – between feudalisms and divine law, the language of which is Latin and the body of which are the clerics.

A society is always constituted by collective individuation phenomena that are stratified at different levels, and which need a plane of reference allowing the handling of disputes – in the Middle Ages this was, in France, divine justice, until the end of the Ancien Régime. After the French Revolution, it was political justice – the nation – that was imposed, including through a language, French, which comes eventually to destroy all other languages.

The Flemish mayor was reacting to the fact that the market has destroyed every process of the individuation of reference. The transindividuation of reference is a plane of sublimation and idealization. It is not on the same plane as that which, as commodity, is exhausted in its consumption. The life of Jesus, the exemplarity of heroes, the nation: these

are objects of sublimation and idealization that allow constructions – they are ‘necessary fictions’ – that make possible the transmission of knowledge. They constitute what Pierre Legendre calls ‘the dogmatics of knowledge’, the indisputable (1999; 2006). For example, we all speak French, we all believe in God, we all fight for the freedom of French territory even if we speak Breton, and so on. Today, this plane that no longer exists has been replaced by the transindividuation of marketing (Stiegler, 2008: 107ff.) – and the Flemish mayor would like to rediscover transindividuation through language.

Nihilism

BS: Capitalism has systematically pursued the capturing and harnessing of all the dynamics of individuation and transindividuation, and has thereby destroyed the transindividuation of reference, engendering frustration and the exhaustion of transindividuation. Brand identification, piercing, this or that ‘practice’ prompted by the market sooner or later reveals its vacuousness, and leads to de-identification and disappointment: to the experience of what Nietzsche called nihilism – where the person who experiences it discovers himself or herself to be *nihil*. To be nothing is to lose the feeling of existing. This is what happened to Richard Durn. It is also the case for all kinds of other suicidal murderers [from 11 September 2001 to 24 March 2015, from Mohamed Atta to Andreas Lubitz, passing through Durn, the Kouachi brothers and many others].

An adolescent of 13 to 14 years, in any high school in France, and not only in the poorest neighbourhoods, less and less sees his or her teacher as a figure of ideality. Take the example of a biology teacher (in France, a teacher of the life and earth sciences). Current knowledge in biology raises huge questions. But nothing that is taught in today’s programs enables teachers to address these questions: current knowledge in biology puts in question everything that is taught in these programs. The teachers who teach biology in high school have received a classical education in molecular biology, which, in addition to being in debate today, led to biotechnologies for which there is no satisfactory theory and which in some way empty of its meaning the statement that François Jacob, in *The Logic of Life*, placed at the heart of neo-Darwinism, namely, that ‘the [genetic] program cannot receive lessons from experience’ (1973: 3, translation modified).

Today, technology directs all scientific activity, qua what is referred to as ‘technoscience’ – where science has become a machine for producing innovation, that is, efficiency, and not truth. I say, indeed, ‘producing truth’, since I believe that this is the role of reason – as one produces evidence in a trial and where truth has a performative dimension. Science in the service of innovation no longer produces theorems but efficiencies, or rather, efficient causes that ‘work’, that is, that function – as a function of a whole from which the question has been eliminated: this science is purely analytical; it flees the synthetic questions that constitute the ideas of reason and what Whitehead called the function of reason (1929). But we do not know *how* and how long these efficient causalities can ‘work’. For example, we do not know how to explain in a satisfactory theoretical way what a genetically modified organism is within the whole of life. There is no agreement about this within the scientific community. Teachers who have to discuss this with their students – who hear it discussed constantly in the media, including through the issue of surrogate motherhood – are de-legitimated, and they do not feel legitimate because they have not been trained in these issues that do not yet form a knowledge – but rather a non-knowledge. They do not teach prevailing knowledge, they therefore no longer embody any ideality, and hence there does not occur any process of identification or of sublimation: what results is a rejection, the painful awareness of which is increasing, on the part of students, and that, combined with the absence of economic future and the prospect (for some, inevitable) of unemployment, can lead only to despair.

If now these students are approached by Wahhabi Islamist militants, financed by the King of Saudi Arabia, who has put a lot of money into the French *banlieues*, teaching them an extremely radical and anti-modernist version of Islam – Wahhabism – they identify with this ideology, and do so all the more easily that the Saudi royal family is courted by the entire West, beginning with François Hollande.

How can young people who lack figures with whom to identify not lose their bearings in such a situation? Any populist – whether they are a far-right populist or a jihadist – can channel negative sublimation in their direction. A youthful psychic apparatus cannot become adult without sublimation. If he does not find it in his father, or in his teacher, or in his priest, or in his football coach, he will look for it where he can find it. And lures can be found among all those who exploit the misery and poverty of the world: the far right, jihadism, fundamentalisms, but also marketing, drug

traffickers and so on. Now, these lures are all the more effective in that sublimation is *always* founded on the lure of a necessary fiction.

The question of Islam

BS: In Islam, the sublimation of sexuality is very different from sublimation in Jewish and Christian monotheism. Jewish and Christian monotheisms have themselves been transformed by Islam. Islam accomplished the modernization of monotheism well before the Jews and Christians. At that time, Islam was not just a religion, it was an extremely important military, economic and political power that structured almost all of southern Europe. Despite its divisions, the Islamic empire was, along with China, the most prosperous region in the world. And then there occurred a slow decline of Ottoman power, due to a reversal of the situation that, starting in the fifteenth century and passing through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, led to colonialism and capitalism, and to the West prevailing over Islam. Through many major conflicts and transformations of Christianity, modernization shifted to Judeo-Christianity (the worst of these conflicts being anti-Semitism).

This modernization of Judeo-Christianity – operating through capitalism in the sense of Max Weber (1992) – will lead to secularization, that will in turn result in the progressive de-sacralization of a number of prohibitions, in particular those related to sexuality and diet (including through the marriage of pastors in the Reformed Church). Islam did not go through this experience. Since the fifteenth or sixteenth century, Islam has erected borders to protect itself from the destruction of its civilization by the modernity of the Judeo-Christians, whom we should never forget were firstly conquerors, warriors and murderous, just as Islam was at its origin. Judaism, on the contrary, did integrate into Christian Europe, but at the cost of regular massacres, the last and the worst of which was Auschwitz. Judaism has often been at the forefront of the secularization brought by capitalism – and a great many leading scientists of Europe were Jews. Freud is in this an exemplary figure. The most emancipated of the Europeans in the era of Freud is Freud, and he is a Jew. He was not a believer, but he claimed the Mosaic culture.

In all this there remains something unresolved, something even deeply repressed, including in French philosophy, notably in what French

philosophy has to say (or fails to say) about the divine, the religious and the sacred. The few texts that touch upon the question of religious belief in the world, on the status of God in Western history and on the so-called 'return of the religious' are often lamentable. Yet until recently God was *the* question of philosophy. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, one cannot be a philosopher if one does not respond to the question of God. It is a necessary question even if one is an atheist. It is the question that has constituted philosophy since Plato, as borne out by Aristotle. Now, what does one have to say, today, on the question of God *and of the death of God*, beyond what we know from Weber and Freud, and since our experience of the destruction of the transindividuation of reference by marketing, which neither Freud nor Weber were able to understand?

The apocalypse

BS: If we have to live through what Nietzsche called 'the fulfilment of nihilism' that is, so to speak, the concretization of the 'death of God', then we must pose the question of God – which is obviously not the same as resurrecting Him. Today, we live the ordeal of nihilism; today, nihilism presents itself as such, that is, in the form of the experience that I am nothing.

For a long time it did not present itself as this nothing. It presented itself as 'anything goes', 'I can do it all', 'I can transgress'. When nihilism presents itself as such, can I *recognize* it? What is it that I am living? What is my experience? It is the experience of what Kierkegaard already described as despair (1980). When despair becomes the most common experience, the most widespread, it is no longer possible to ignore the specific questions raised by the death of God, the questions, dare I say, worthy of the death of God. We are in the course of living through what we could call, in religious language, the 'apocalypse' of nihilism. It is here that we must become worthy of the ordeal of nihilism. By suggesting that he himself arrives too soon with this statement, Nietzsche in some way says to us: 'I await the moment when you will truly encounter nihilism. Now I am speaking to you and you believe you understand me. But in fact you do not understand me at all. You *believe* you understand, but you do not understand because if you understood, you would be living through your apocalypse.' Now, we are in the course of living our apocalypse. And it is now that the question arises of

our capacity to *become the quasi-cause of nothing, of nihil*. We must ‘assume’ the pharmacological extremification of this situation. And what interests me in this situation is firstly its visibly and irreducibly organological tenor, where it clearly becomes necessary to ask about the organological conditions that have made all this possible, and about the irreducibly pharmacological character of these conditions – which is a new way of encountering finitude and the infinite.

Ordeals of nihilism

UM: And do you believe that everyone is included in this absolute nihilism? The Chinese, too, for example? Is it throughout the whole world that there is this experience of nihilism?

BS: This is a difficult and fundamental question. Yes, I think that throughout the world there is this experience, but that it is experienced in very different ways. So, also in China. The reason I say this is that the Chinese recognize themselves in my books – quite a few of which are already translated into Chinese.

UM: It is not in terms of exoticism that they are interested?

BS: No, I don’t think so. In 2006, fifteen per cent of Chinese people were already thought to be depressed. Given the speed of the destabilization of social bodies through the adoption of the Western way of life, I believe that this figure will increase significantly. This does not mean that the same thing will be experienced everywhere in the same way.

In the shantytowns of Rabat, I saw in the late 1980s how people watch French programs like *Champs Elysées*, a popular and extremely vulgar show that presented a completely false image of France. Morocco’s poor thus lived nihilism via French television broadcasts. Technology exports processes, the main one of which is the liquidation of processes of the transindividuation of reference, which is the major, concrete reality of nihilism – in return provoking ‘reactivity’ in the Nietzschean sense, *ressentiment*, regression. The process of annihilation can be accomplished in anti-nihilistic ways, through reactions against nihilism that are obviously, in fact, expressions *of nihilism* (for example, fundamentalism). This is what

Paolo Vignola analyses through his symptomatology (2013; 2014). For myself, fundamentalism is a reaction *of nihilism to nihilism*, an *expression* of nihilism, and not a ‘return of the religious’.

Inversions of causality

UM: So do you identify the cause with technology rather than with consumerism, for example?

BS: No, I would not say that. When there are events as tragic and serious as the attacks of 7 January, they produce, as a general rule, inversions of causality where the effect becomes the cause and the cause becomes the effect. I have tried to show this in *Pharmacologie du Front national* (2013a): those who vote for the National Front in fact suffer negative causes, but transform these causes into effects and these effects into causes – they make immigrants the cause of their suffering even though immigrants also suffer, and often more so, from the same causal factors. These inversions constitute a fundamental feature of pharmacology: when the *pharmakon* reveals its toxicity, we look for a *pharmakos*, a scapegoat, rather than collectively change our relation to the *pharmakon*, which can only be done collectively and which those who exploit the toxic effects of the *pharmakon* systematically try to prevent. In the case of jihadism, similar processes occur.

It is not technology that produces inversions of causality. It is the fact that technology is exploited by a capitalism that has become extremely virulent, violent and totally irresponsible, and that brings massive destruction to social structures as well as mental structures and natural environments. The destruction of social structures is not a secondary consequence: it is a goal. Capitalism wants to destroy family, health and educational structures, and so on, in order to make them subject exclusively to its model, which is the ‘rationality’ of the market – which is in reality an irrational computational rationalization that eliminates everything incalculable, *that is, every singularity*.

From the perspective of capitalism, only the market is rational, everything else is irrational, thus the market has all the rights: it can destroy everything, even the education of children. The market will educate children better than can their parents, their teachers or their pastors.

It is obviously through technology that this occurs: this ultra-aggressive consumerism is perpetually undertaking research in order to appropriate the latest innovations. The development of technology demands that it be immediately placed into the service of these models of socialization, which are in fact models of de-socialization.

For me, ultimately, the causes of all these catastrophes (the events of January 7, the far right in France becoming the majority, and so on) stem firstly from the fact that there is no public power capable of proposing a true socialization of these technological powers. We must place these powers back into the service, not of disindividuation and the destruction of individuals, but of reindividuation, re-idealization, the reconstitution of a political space and a solvent economy.

One can always invoke historical, diplomatic, political and theological causes in order to explain these catastrophes. It is important to remember that not only the Koran but also the Bible contains many texts that are essentially about conquest, and therefore warlike, texts that have been the basis of the Crusades, the Inquisition and so on. But we should also remember that we have also seen the de-colonization of the British Empire, on the one hand, and on the other hand the neo-colonization of the Middle East and the Near East by the United States. All the terrible, interconnected catastrophes involving Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and so on are tied to Western interventionist policies, whether these policies are English, American, French or all of them together, or those of the World Trade Organization, policies that have brought destruction to these societies.

Take for example Iraq. The current crisis in Iraq was caused by Saudi Arabia and the United States in an absolutely deliberate way. The ambassador of the United States encouraged Saddam Hussein to attack Kuwait. His party, the Baath, was allied with the Soviet Union, India and the non-aligned countries. Even if there was not much to like about the Baath party, it had built a modern country, with schools, hospitals, a legal system, and it therefore contained sectarian Islam.

All this is now in ruins and inhabited by a collective madness that we Westerners have caused. In Afghanistan, the United States supported Ahmad Shah Massoud against the Soviet Union, who was eventually sacrificed to the Wahhabites. All this is absolutely corrupt. The West has created this situation, and the despair that has been the result. It is a question, not of the 'clash of civilizations' referred to by Samuel Huntington

(1996), but of the criminal actions of the West in a civilization called Islam and that has led to madness throughout the whole region and not only in Islam: in Israel, too, some become mad – extremists, but also in the army, as Israeli soldiers say themselves. Unfortunately, in all this the West reaps what it has sown.

All these facts, however, cannot absolve us from the need to confront the fact that we are not capable – *we*, the ‘intellectuals’, we, the people who claim to think – of using contemporary technology to produce models different from those developed by consumerism. And this is the first problem. If we were able to do so, all those kids who become suicidal, and who sometimes act out in Syria or elsewhere, would invest instead in new causes and would project new idealities. We have no causes to offer them. This is the problem, and it is our problem – it is our responsibility.

Translated by Daniel Ross.

Notes

¹ “Pansexuality” is not the assertion that sexuality is everything, or that everything can be explained in terms of sexuality and only by it; but it is the discovery that, in the exploration of the unconscious that is the specific domain of psychoanalysis, there is no path that does not constantly cross and intersect sexual representations. If it is not everything, sexuality is nevertheless present throughout the psychoanalytic field: it is coextensive with the unconscious.’ (Laplanche, 1997: 1).

² As Ian James suggests (2013: 308).

³ Deleuze: ‘if we die of repetition we are also saved and healed by it’ (1994: 6), and ‘if repetition makes us ill, it also heals us; if it enchains and destroys us, it also frees us’ (19).

⁴ *Ars Industrialis* is an international association of citizens working ‘for an industrial politics of technologies of spirit’; it was created on 18 June 2005 at the initiative of George Collins, Marc Crépon, Catherine Perret, and Bernard and Caroline Stiegler. Information: arsindustrialis.org/.

⁵ The event was organized by *Planète Emergences* and *Ars Industrialis* in the framework of the festival, *Marseille retrouve le nord*.

⁶ Marc Van Asch, mayor of Vilvoorde from 2007 to 2012.

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