

Schizo-Economy

Franco Berardi (Bifo)

A New Disciplinary Field

At the end of the period of capitalist triumphalism and neoliberal ideological hegemony, must we return to the old analytical categories of Marxism and the political strategies of the twentieth-century workers' movement, to the horizons of democratic socialism or revolutionary communism? Nothing would be more inconclusive. The capitalism of mass networks that was fully implemented in the 1990s has produced social forms that are completely irreducible to the Marxist analysis of class. The categories of the critique of political economy are now insufficient, because processes of subjectivation traverse fields that are much more complex. A new disciplinary field is starting to be delineated in the encounter between the territories of economics, semiology, and psychochemistry.

Semio-capital is capital-flux that coagulates in semiotic artefacts without materializing itself. The concepts forged by two centuries of economic thought seem to have disintegrated; they seem inoperative and incapable of comprehending a great deal of the phenomena that have emerged in the sphere of social production since the time when production became cognitive. Cognitive activity has always been at the basis of human production, including production of a more mechanical variety. There is no human labor process that does not imply the exercise of intelligence. But now cognitive capacity is becoming the essential productive resource. In the sphere of industrial labor, the mind was put to work as a repetitive automatism, as the physiological support of muscular movement. Today the mind is at work as innovation, as language and as a communicative relation. The subsumption of the mind under the process of capitalist valorization leads to a genuine mutation. The conscious and sensitive organism is submitted to competitive pressure, to an acceleration of stimuli, to constant attentive stress. As a result, the mental environment, the infosphere in which the mind develops and enters into relations with other minds, becomes a psychopathogenic environment. To understand semio-capital's infinite

game of mirrors, we must outline a new disciplinary field delimited by three aspects:

- the critique of the political economy of connective intelligence;
- the semiology of linguistic-economic fluxes;
- a psychochemistry of the infospheric environment that studies the psychopathogenic effects of economic exploitation on the human mind.

The process of digital production is tending to assume a biological form. It is becoming like an organism: the nervous system of an organization is analogous to the human nervous system. Every industrial enterprise has “autonomic” systems, operational processes that must function for its survival. What was lacking from organizations in the past were the links between pieces of information, corresponding to neurons interconnected in the brain. The networked digital business functions like an excellent artificial nervous system. In it, information flows quickly and naturally, like thought in a human being, and we are able to use technology to govern and co-ordinate groups of people with the same speed with which we can concentrate on a specific problem. According to Bill Gates (*Business @ the Speed of Thought*), the conditions have now been created for the realization of a new kind of economic system, centered on what can be defined as “Business at the speed of thought.”

In the connected world, the retroactive loops¹ of general systems theory are fused with the dynamic logic of biogenetics in a post-human vision of digital production. Human minds and human flesh will be able to integrate themselves with the digital circuit thanks to interfaces of acceleration and simplification: a model of bio-info production is emerging that produces semiotic artefacts capable of automatically replicating living systems in accordance with the laws of the capitalist economy. Once fully operative, the digital nervous system can rapidly install itself in every form of organization. This means that it is only in appearance that Microsoft concerns itself with software, products and services. In reality, the hidden aim of software production is that of wiring the human mind into a network continuum² of the cybernetic type, destined to structure the fluxes of digital information via the nervous system of all the key institutions of contemporary life. Microsoft needs therefore to be considered as a global virtual memory that can be downloaded and installed at any time. A cyber-panoptikon inserted in the fleshy circuits of human subjectivity. Cybernetics finally becomes life, or, as Bill Gates likes to say, “information is our vital fluid.”

The Psychic Collapse of the Economy

The digital nervous system progressively incorporates itself into the organic nervous system, the circuit of human communication, recodifying it in accordance with its operational parameters and specific velocity. But in order for this transformation to take place, the body-mind [*corpo-mente*] must undergo an infernal mutation, one we are now seeing unfold in world history. To understand and analyze this process, neither the conceptual instruments of political economy nor those of technological analysis are sufficient. The production process is becoming semiotic; the formation of the digital nervous system involves and enervates the mind, the social psyche, desires and hopes, fears and the imagination. It follows that if we want to analyze these productive transformations, we must concern ourselves with semiotic production, with linguistic and cognitive mutation. And this mutation occurs by means of the spread of pathologies.

Neoliberal culture has injected into the social brain a constant stimulus towards competition, and the technical system of the digital network has rendered possible an intensification of the informatic stimuli transmitted from the social brain to individual brains. This acceleration of stimuli is a pathogenic factor that has wide-ranging social effects. The combination of economic competition with the digital intensification of informatic stimuli induces a state of permanent electrocution that leads to a diffuse pathological condition; this pathological condition manifests itself as panic syndrome or attention disorder.

Panic is an ever-more widespread syndrome. Until a few years ago, psychiatrists hardly recognized this symptom, which belonged rather to the Romantic literary imagination and was associated with the feeling of being overwhelmed by the infinite richness of natural forms, by the unlimited power of the cosmos. Today panic is ever-more frequently denounced as a painful and worrying symptom—the physical sensation of no longer succeeding in governing one's own body, an acceleration of the heart rate, a shortness of breath that can lead to fainting and paralysis.

Although, to my knowledge, there exists no exhaustive research on this issue, the hypothesis can be proposed that the mediatization of communication and the consequent rarefaction of physical contact can provoke pathologies in the affective and emotional spheres. For the first time in human history, there exists a generation that has learned more words and heard more stories from television than from its mother. Attention disorders are increasingly widespread. Millions of North American and European children are treated for a disturbance that

manifests itself as the incapacity to concentrate on an object for more than a few seconds. The constant excitation of the mind by neuro-stimulant fluxes probably leads to a pathological state of saturation. If we want to understand the contemporary economy we must concern ourselves with the psychopathology of relations. And if we want to understand contemporary psychochemistry we must take into account the fact that the mind is invested by semiotic fluxes that follow an extra-semiotic principle: the principle of economic competition, the principle of maximum exploitation. Ever since capitalism has connected to the brain, it has inserted into it a pathogenic agent, a psychotic meme that accelerates pulsations until they become tremors, to the point of collapse.

During the 1990s, the culture of Prozac was inseparable from the culture of the new economy. Hundreds of thousands of operators, directors and managers of the Western economy have taken innumerable decisions in a state of chemical euphoria and psychopharmacological lightheadedness. But eventually the body [*l'organismo*] caved in, unable to support indefinitely the chemical euphoria that had sustained competitive enthusiasm and productivist fanaticism. Collective attention is now supersaturated and this is provoking social and economic collapse. Just as with a cyclotomic³ organism or a patient affected by bipolar disorder,⁴ the financial euphoria of the 1990s was followed by depression. This depression is also of the clinical variety; it undermines motivation, initiative, self-esteem, desire and sex-appeal. To understand the crisis of the new economy, we must begin from the psychic experience of the virtual class; we must reflect on the psychic and emotional state of the millions of cognitive workers who animated the scenes of business, culture and the imaginary during the 1990s. The psychic depression of a single cognitive worker is not a consequence of the economic crisis, but its cause. It would be simple to consider depression as the consequence of a bad business cycle. After having worked happily and profitably for so many years, share value plummets and our brain worker⁵ suffers a bad case of depression. That's not what happened. The cognitive worker has fallen into depression because his or her emotional, physical and intellectual system cannot indefinitely support the hyperactivity provoked by the market and by psycho-pharmaceuticals. It's as a result of this that things have started to go wrong on the market. What is the market? It's the place where signs and the need for meaning, where desires and projections meet. If we want to speak of supply and demand, then we must think in terms of fluxes of desire and in terms of semiotic attractors that have lost their appeal.⁶

In the Net economy, flexibility has evolved into a form of labor fractalization. Fractalization means the modular and recombinant fragmentation of activity time. The worker no longer exists as a person. He or she is only an interchangeable producer of those micro-fragments of recombinant semiosis that enter into the continuous flux of the Net. Capital no longer remunerates the worker's prolonged availability for exploitation; it no longer pays a salary that covers a working person's full range of economic needs. The worker (a machine endowed with a brain that can be used for fragments of time) is paid for momentary, occasional and temporary services. Work time is fragmented and cellularized. Cells of time are for sale on the Net and businesses can buy as many as they want without being obliged to contribute in any way to the worker's social security. Cognitive labor is an ocean of microscopic fragments of time; cellularization is the technique that makes it possible to recombine fragments of time within the framework of a single semio-product. The cell phone can be considered the assembly line of cognitive labor, thanks to which the total dependence of cognitive labor is realized.

The intense and prolonged investment of mental and libidinal energies in the labor process has created the conditions for a psychic collapse that has passed into the economic arena with the recession and the fall in demand; it has passed into the political arena in the form of military aggression. The use of the word "collapse" is not metaphorical; it describes what is happening to the Western mind with clinical accuracy. The word "collapse" refers to a genuine pathological case, one that invests the psycho-social organism. What we saw in the period after the first symptoms of economic decline, during the first months of the new century, was a psychopathic phenomenon of overexcitement, heart tremors, panic and, finally, decline into depression. Economic depression has always involved a crisis of the psycho-social equilibrium, but now that the production process has integrated the brain in a substantial way, psychopathology has become the most important aspect of economic cycles.

The attention time available to the workers involved in the informatic cycle is constantly being reduced: they are involved in a growing number of mental tasks that occupy every fragment of their attention time. They no longer have time to dedicate to love, tenderness or affection. They take Viagra because they don't have time for sexual preliminaries. They take cocaine to be constantly alert and reactive. They take Prozac to cancel out the sense of meaninglessness that unexpectedly empties their life of any interest. Cellularization has led to a kind of permanent occupation

of life time. The result is a psychopathic mutation of social relations. The signs are clear: millions of packets of psycho-pharmaceuticals sold; an epidemic of attention disorders spreading among children and adolescents; the quotidian use of Ritalin and other drugs at school; a panic epidemic that seems to be spreading through the fabric of everyday life.

The Infosphere and the Social Mind

The mediascape⁷ is the continuously evolving media system, the universe of transmitters that send signals to our brain in the most varied formats. The infosphere is the interface between the media system and the mind that receives these signals – the mental ecosphere, that immaterial region where semiotic fluxes interact with the reception antennae of the minds scattered across the planet. The Mind is the universe of receivers. These receivers are of course not limited to receiving signals; they also process and create them, thereby setting in motion new processes of transmission and provoking the continuous evolution of the mediascape.

The evolution of the infosphere in the video-electronic era—the activation of increasingly complex networks for the distribution of information—has produced a leap not just in the power and speed, but in the very format of the infosphere. No corresponding leap has occurred with regard to the power and format of Reception.

The universe of receivers—the ensemble of human brains, of real people made of flesh and fragile and sensual organs—is not formatted according to the same standards as the system of digital transmitters. The functional paradigm of the universe of Transmitters does not correspond to that of the universe of Receivers. This asymmetry manifests itself in various pathological effects: permanent electrocution, panic, overexcitement, hypermobility, attention disorders, dyslexia, information overload, the saturation of reception circuits.

This saturation results from a genuine deformity. The format of the universe of transmitters has evolved, multiplying its powers, while the format of the universe of receivers has not been able to evolve in as rapid a manner—for the simple reason that it is based on an organic support structure (the human brain-body) that has an evolutionary pace completely different from that of machines.

What is presently unfolding could be defined as a paradigmatic discrepancy, a rift between the paradigms that determine the universe of transmitters and that of receivers. In such a situation, communication

becomes an asymmetrical, disturbed process. We could speak of a discrepancy between an endlessly expanding cyberspace and cybertime. Cyberspace is a network that includes mechanical and organic components, and its processing power can be accelerated endlessly; cybertime is an essentially lived reality, linked to an organic support (the human body and brain), and its processing pace cannot be accelerated beyond relatively rigid natural limits.

Ever since he wrote *Speed and Politics* in 1977, Paul Virilio has maintained that speed is the decisive factor in modern history. It is thanks to speed, Virilio claims, that wars are won—not only military ones, but also commercial ones. In numerous publications, Virilio demonstrates that the speed of movement, of transportation and motorization has allowed armies to win wars throughout the last century. Ever since it has become possible to substitute objects, goods and people with signs—that is, with virtual and electronically transferable phantasms—the limits of speed have been expanded by the most impressive process of acceleration that human history has ever seen. There is a sense in which one can say that space no longer exists, since information can travel across it instantly and events can be transferred in real time from one place on the planet to another, becoming virtually shared events. But what are the consequences of this acceleration for the human mind and the human body? To understand them, we must consider the thinking and feeling organism's capacity for the conscious elaboration and affective assimilation of signs and events.

The acceleration of information exchanges has produced—and continues to produce—a pathological effect not just on the individual human mind, but also on the collective mind. Individuals are not able to consciously process the immense and ever-increasing quantity of information that enters their computers, their cell phones, their television screens, their electronic diaries and their heads. And yet it seems essential to follow, know, evaluate, assimilate, and process all this information, if one wants to be efficient, competitive, victorious. The practice of multitasking,⁸ the opening of hypertextual windows of attention and the constant passage from one context to another all tend to deform the sequential modalities of mental processing. According to Christian Marazzi, who has concerned himself in various publications with the relations between the linguistic economy and affectivity, the latest generation of economic agents is affected by a genuine form of dyslexia: they are unable to read a page from beginning to end according to sequential procedures, unable to focus attention on one object for a

prolonged period of time. Dyslexia becomes an increasingly widespread characteristic of cognitive and social behavior, to the point where the pursuit of linear strategies becomes almost impossible.

Some (like Davenport and Beck, in the book *Attention Economy*), speak of an “attention economy.” But when a cognitive faculty becomes part of economic discourse, this means that it has become a scarce resource. There is a shortage of the time necessary for paying attention to the fluxes of information we are exposed to and must evaluate in our decision-making processes. The consequence is in front of our eyes: political and economic decisions no longer respond to any long-term strategic rationality; they simply obey immediate interests. What is more, we are less and less inclined to freely contribute our attention. We no longer have the attention time for love, tenderness, nature, pleasure and compassion. Our attention is ever more besieged, and therefore we devote it only to our career, to competition and economic decisions. In any case, it’s clear that we cannot replicate the insane speed of the hypercomplex digital machine. Human beings are tending to become the ruthless executors of decisions taken inattentively.

The universe of transmitters—or cyberspace—now operates at superhuman speed; it cannot be adequately coordinated with a universe of receivers—or cybertime—that is incapable of going any faster than the physical substance of the brain, the slowness of the body and the need for caresses and affection. A pathological rift opens up and mental illness spreads, as testified to by the statistics and above all by our everyday experience. And as pathology spreads, so too do drugs. The flourishing industry of psycho-pharmaceuticals sets new records every year; the sales of Ritalin, Prozac, Zoloft and other psychotropics increase continually, while alienation, suffering, desperation and terror, the desire not to exist, to not have to fight constantly, to disappear all increase, along with the will to kill and to kill oneself.

When an acceleration of productive and communicative rhythms was imposed in the Western metropolises towards the end of the 1970s, we witnessed a drug epidemic of giant proportions. The world was leaving its human epoch to enter the era of machinic and post-human acceleration; many sensitive organisms of the human variety began to snort cocaine, a substance that allows one to accelerate one’s existential rhythm to the point of becoming a machine. Many other sensitive organisms of the human kind injected heroin into their veins, a substance that de-links a person from the pace of their environment. The epidemic of powders that erupted between the 1970s and 1980s produced an

existential and cultural devastation of which we have yet to take stock. Then illegal drugs were replaced by those legal substances that the white-coated pharmaceutical industry provides to its victims; the epoch of anti-depressants, of uppers and mood regulators began.

Today psychopathology reveals itself more and more clearly as a social and, more precisely, a socio-communicative epidemic. If you want to survive you have to be competitive; if you want to be competitive you have to be connected—you have to continually receive and process an immense and growing mass of data. This provokes constant attention stress and a reduction in the time available for affectivity. These two closely linked tendencies spell devastation for the individual psyche. Depression, panic, anxiety, a sense of solitude, existential misery. But these individual symptoms cannot be isolated indefinitely, as psychopathology has done until now, and as economic power wants them to be. It's not possible to say: "You're exhausted, go take a vacation at Club Med, take a pill, go on a cure, get off my balls, recover in the psychiatric hospital, kill yourself." It's no longer possible, for the simple reason that the issue is no longer a small minority of crazies or a marginal number of depressives. It's a question of a growing mass of existential misery threatening to explode in the center of the social system. It's also necessary to consider this decisive fact: as long as capital needed to suck physical energy from its exploited and from its slaves, psychopathology could remain relatively marginal. Your psychic suffering didn't matter much to capital when you only had to turn screws and handle a lathe. You could be as sad as a solitary fly in a bottle; your productivity was hardly affected because your muscles still functioned. Today capital needs mental energies, psychic energies. And they're exactly what's going to hell. That's why psychopathology is exploding at the center of the social scene. The economic crisis results largely from the spread of sadness, depression, panic, lack of motivation. The crisis of the new economy was provoked in considerable part by a crisis of motivation, by a waning of the artificial euphoria of the 1990s. This has led to disinvestment and, in part, to a fall in consumption. In general, unhappiness functions as a stimulus to consumption; to purchase something is to suspend one's anxiety, to counteract one's loneliness, but only up to a point. Beyond that point, suffering has a negative effect on the desire to purchase. So conflicting strategies are developed. The masters of the world certainly don't want humanity to be happy, because a happy humanity would not let itself get caught up in productivity, the discipline of work or hypermarkets. Nonetheless, techniques that can reduce happiness to a

tolerable level are being studied, in order to postpone or prevent a suicidal explosion, in order to induce the desire to consume.

What strategies will the collective organism follow in order to escape this factory of unhappiness? Is a strategy of deceleration, of the reduction of complexity possible and conceivable? I don't believe so. In human society, potentiality cannot be definitively canceled out, even when it reveals itself to be lethal for the individual and, in all probability, for the species as well. Such potentiality is regulated and kept under control for as long as possible, but in the end it is inevitably actualized, as happened (and will happen again) with the atomic bomb. One possible strategy consists in the upgrading⁹ of the human organism, the mechanical adjustment of the human body and brain to a hyper-fast infosphere. This is the strategy commonly defined as "post-human."¹⁰ Finally, a strategy of subtraction is possible, a strategy of distancing oneself from the vortex—but only small communities will be able to follow it, constituting spheres of existential, economic, and informational autonomy from the world economy.

Translated by Michael Goddard

Translator's Notes

1. English in original.
2. English in original.
3. "Cyclotimic," is a medical term for manic depression or violent mood swings.
4. English in original.
5. English in original.
6. English in original.
7. English in original.
8. English in original.
9. English in original.
10. English in original.