

Review: *The Neganthropocene*.

By Bernard Stiegler. Edited and translated by Daniel Ross.
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Bernard Stiegler's work has unfolded itself as an architecture of concepts revolving around the question of technology, which he understands broadly as denoting any external memory support. This includes digital and analog technologies, as well as any other tool. His thought is extremely dense, drawing upon a rich tradition of continental philosophy, whilst also closely engaging with science, physics, biology and neuroscience: an approach that has recently led Ian James (2019) to elaborate on how this could be considered characteristic of a post-Continental naturalistic tendency in contemporary philosophy, and more particularly, in the French context. Representative of this new post-deconstructive turn on the horizon of French thought, Stiegler introduces the notions of *entropy* and *negentropy*, taken from thermodynamics, into the debate on the Anthropocene, advocating for the active transformation of the Anthropocene into what he calls the Neganthropocene, and which he relates to the *reevaluation of value* itself. Whereas *entropy* denotes the gradual decomplexification of the universe, here considered as a closed system, *negentropy* is the property of a system that fights *entropy*. *The Neganthropocene* gives an extensive overview of this proposal which seeks to escape the Anthropocene, by building upon these laws of physics.

Although Stiegler does not write with the intention of conceiving a linear narrative, making it possible to start reading his work from the middle, his abundant use of both idiosyncratic and borrowed concepts and their intricate interconnectedness might initially feel quite intimidating. *The Neganthropocene* absorbs this *shock*, as the translator Daniel Ross thoroughly introduces it. Ross's preliminary text gives a particularly rich account of certain broad changes that Stiegler's thought has undergone, thoughtfully explaining how he builds upon Aristotle, Heidegger, and Husserl, as well as upon theories in physics such as the second law of thermodynamics and Schrödinger's consideration of life as that which fights *entropy*: *negentropy*. Positing that the human and technics are co-constitutive, characterized by a default of origin, Ben Roberts has argued (2012) that Stiegler's philosophy represents a new challenge to media studies by offering a way out of the opposition between the social constructivist approach and the substantivist theory of technology, a distinction identified by Andrew Feenberg (Roberts 2012, 9). From this perspective, *The Neganthropocene* is not only valuable for cinema and media studies because the

collection includes two papers discussing the negentropic potentials of film, and screens more generally, but equally contributes to the field in a broader sense by rethinking our understanding of technology itself.

So, what is *entropy*? What is *negentropy*? Moreover, how does this relate to questions of value and a possible escape from the Anthropocene? Controversial as it may seem, Stiegler decentres the question of global warming and climate change in the debate on the Anthropocene. Albeit not dismissing the gravity of our coming environmental disaster, Stiegler foregrounds the necessity to question what it means to no longer *believe* in the possibility to change human behavior and how to reverse it (2018, 35). According to Stiegler, the problem of the Anthropocene is that of *entropy*, also leading him to recast the geological era as that of the *Entropocene*. The second law of thermodynamics, of course, holds that the *entropy* of the universe only increases, which means that the universe, conceived of as an isolated system, would inevitably move from a state of order to disorder. Counterintuitively, the disorder in a closed system does not correspond to a state of complexity, but a state of decomplexification or *entropy*, which is also how it should be understood in Stiegler's thought. Because life is a form of differentiation, that of the complexification of biological systems, Stiegler reads *negentropy* in the Derridean sense as *différance*. Consequently, since Stiegler considers human life as co-constituted by technology, technology itself could, in fact, be *negentropic*, as it gives rise to new forms of life. 'Above all, technics consists in the *organization of inorganic matter*, leading in return to the *organological reorganization of cerebral organic matter* [...] giving rise to a new form of life, [...] a new form of negentropy' (42).

The problem of the Anthropocene, however, is that life no longer fights *entropy*, due to its co-constitution with technologies that inhibit differentiation. With the advent of the digital economy, it is no longer solely commodities that are subjected to the calculability of the market, but equally our spiritual lives. The Capitalocene, and it needs to be admitted that it is unclear whether Stiegler truly distinguishes the two terms, decomplexifies life by reducing it to predictability and sameness. Thought, decision-making, and desire are now increasingly being governed by algorithms in our *hypercontrol societies*. Relating this development to Heidegger's critique of modernity and *Gestell* (enframing), the Anthropocene, according to Stiegler, is that which puts an end to the possibility of questioning itself (2018, 260). Although not highlighted by Ross, this also relates to Stiegler's reading of Marx, and in particular his interpretation of the fragment on machines from the *Grundrisse*. Stiegler explains noetic development to be cyclical processes of exteriorization and interiorization, a dynamic in which knowledge gets exteriorized by means of technics that in turn serve to interiorize that knowledge.

An obvious example would be a notebook instrumental in our ability to memorize knowledge over time. With the automation of knowledge by digital technologies, this is, however, no longer needed. In fact, the existence of these technologies imposes a certain speed upon our spiritual lives that no longer allows

for a return of knowledge. Just like the worker in *Grundrisse* lost their practical knowledge, or skill, by it being automated by machines, we are now collectively losing our conceptual and theoretical capacities. This is a phenomenon that Stiegler refers to as *generalized proletarianization*, a state that affects everyone and not solely the proletariat. Hence, according to Stiegler, we now live in an epistēmē of absolute non-knowledge, and which thus should be considered as an anti-epistēmē.

In our age of industrial capitalism and the calculability of everything including that of the future, we have reached the *completion of nihilism*, as the noetic soul starts to put itself into question (2018, 38). Does it make any sense to think in the advent of our global extinction? What use is there to philosophy if there is no more tomorrow? Defining reason as ‘a regime of *différance*,’ (254) Stiegler argues that it is exactly our noetic capacities that we should again value in order to escape the Anthropocene. We would need a ‘*transvaluation of all values*’ (38; 67; 209), given that thought itself has lost its meaning faced with its automation and the environmental catastrophe.

This, however, does not mean that Stiegler encourages us to blame the machines in Luddite fashion. On the contrary, one of the pillars of Stiegler’s philosophical stronghold is that technics are *pharmacological*, functioning both as a remedy and as poison. Technology has the potential of enhancing, as well as inhibiting our cognitive abilities. As such, the value of value would need to become neganthropy, hereby introducing a ‘passage to the Neganthropocene’ (2018, 46). More concretely, this would mean to reintroduce cyclical processes of noetic unfolding into our use of digital technologies, but also in our living practices. Stiegler himself tries to implement this with a variety of projects, one of which is *Plaine Commune*, an experiment in a suburb north of Paris, which attempts at creating ‘a cooperative of knowledges – based on a training and knowledge transmission network’ (124).

The Neganthropocene, by bringing together a selection of Stiegler’s more recent papers gives a good impression of the main arguments that characterize his work overall, but is more particularly insightful when it comes to a development in his work that has been identified to have started after the publication of *Symbolic Misery* (2014), and which is more explicitly concerned with questions of political economy, or more broadly, the political (de Beistegui 2013, 181). As a comprehensive introduction, *The Neganthropocene*, however, also exposes some of his philosophy’s pitfalls, namely, as Benoît Dillet has also pointed out (2017, 82; 90), Stiegler’s tendency to multiply concepts that do not seem sufficiently distinct from each other. In *The Neganthropocene* this is especially prevalent when it comes to the notions of *proletarianization* and *de-noetization*. *Proletarianization*, describing a general loss of knowledge as the effect of the short-circuiting of memory, seems fairly identical to the idea of *de-noetization*. In turn, the equations made between Derridean notions and concepts taken from physics put into doubt whether they maintain their specificity.

More importantly, *The Neganthropocene* exposes Stiegler's depoliticization of today's planetary crisis. Instead of calling upon the responsibility of political actors or fundamentally questioning capitalism's growth imperative, a certain praise for thinking itself takes the central position on the stage of Stiegler's own thought. Given the concrete effects climate change has upon peoples' lives, this elitism appears rather misplaced but unfortunately seems quite consistent throughout his work. Especially in his reinterpretation of the proletariat, or his notion of *proletarianization*, it comes to the fore that Stiegler seeks to undo the politics of class antagonism, something that indeed according to him is, in fact, already a question of the past.

NOTES

¹ Stiegler foregrounds Heideggerian *Dasein* as 'constituted by the "possibility of questioning"' (2018, 36).

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