

2k18 // RE-EVOLUTIONARY ABORT

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Abstract

The task of this essay is to re-examine the question of revolutionary possibility and the critical force of “experimental knowledge” in the wake of May 1968 and the post-WWII reversal of the relationship between science and politics, as encompassed in what Harvey Wheeler termed the “universal revolution” of cybernetics. Concentrating on Félix Guattari’s description of 1968 as “abortive” – in contrast to the emerging politics of total “World Order” – an argument is advanced for rethinking the logic of revolution, not as an historical antagonism orientated by a succession of “Ends” (culminating in the present discourse of the Anthropocene), but as a “technology” of *re-evolution*. In doing so, it draws together a constellation of ideas from Marx and Blanqui, via Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* and Guy Debord’s Situationist theses, to the recent work of Bernard Stiegler and McKenzie Wark. The purpose of this is to test certain notions of individual and collective agency against a general concept of technicity, in the formulation of what Deleuze and Guattari have posited as “desiring production.” Consequently, former appeals to an historical materialism are refigured: on the one hand by a re-thinking of historical subjectivity in terms of a “stochastic materialism,” and on the other via a critique of the “prestige commodity” of revolution itself (here manifested in the *figure* of “May 68”).

“The present order is the disorder of the future.”

Saint Just

1. The Criterion that Revolutionary Knowledge Must Become Power

“When the revolution is still a long way off,” Guy Debord argues, in *The Real Split in the International* (1972), “the difficult task comes down increasingly to *the practice of theory*. When the revolution commences, its difficult task comes down increasingly to *the theory of practice...*” (Debord 2003: §47, 63). But if the capacity to transform *knowledge* into *power* rests upon the capacity to transform *theory* into *praxis*, according to standard dogma, what then is the foundation of revolutionary knowledge? The empowerment of this revolutionary knowledge remains premised on the *individual and collective agency* vested in its organisation: the so-called

“revolutionary class.” This “class” is itself, however, contradictorily organised across these two phases – according to a line of thought extending at least to Blanqui – between an *avantgarde* (those few, *ahead of their time*, whose coherence and ability to communicate an overall project *prepares the way*), and the so-called proletariat, those “masses of workers” who, as Debord says, “are *of their time* and must remain there as its sole possessors... *refusing all delegation of power to a separate vanguard.*” Subsequently “the great majority of the proletarian class must hold and exercise all powers by organising themselves into permanent deliberative and executive assemblies” (Debord 2003: §47, 63-4, emphasis added), etc. – a point at which the Situationists themselves saw their role as concluded: “We were there to combat the spectacle, not govern it” (Debord 2003: §43, 60). (Indeed, this vexed third phase, of *consolidation of power*, has often been characterised as inaugurating a counter-revolution from within: the revolutionary organisation reconstituted as Corporate-State Apparatus, subsumed into the evolution of a “bureaucratic capitalism” from which it had never, in any case, escaped.)

The contest over individual and collective agency stands at the heart of every ideological encounter, yet no more so than the contest over what individual and collective agency *is*. “The theory of revolution,” Debord writes, “in no way falls exclusively within the domain of strictly scientific knowledge...” of the form *What is?*

Revolutionary theory is the domain of danger, the domain of uncertainty; it is forbidden to people who crave the sleep inducing certainties of ideology, including even the official certainty of being the strict enemies of all ideology. It is a conflict between general interests concerning social practice as a whole, and only in this respect does it differ from other conflicts. The rules of conflict are its rules, war is its means, and its operations are more comparable to an art than to a piece of scientific research or a catalogue of good intentions. The theory of revolution is judged on the sole criterion that its *knowledge* must become *power*. (Debord 2003: §46, 62)

Reflecting (contemporaneously with Debord) on the situation four years previously in Paris – over which the Situationist International had expressed a certain proprietary interest¹ – Félix Guattari made the following observation: “In May 1968, from the first sparks to local clashes, the shake-up was brutally transmitted to the whole of society, including some groups that had nothing remotely to do with the revolutionary movement – doctors, lawyers, grocers. Yet it was vested interests that carried the day, but only after a month of burning” (Guattari 2009: 41). Citing

¹ “Le rôle de l’avant-garde culturelle, l’Internationale situationniste (IS), sur les slogans et la thermodynamique de Mai 68 est évident et pourtant difficile à établir tant la posture de père spirituel s’accorde mal avec l’esprit du mouvement.” (Loyer, 2008: 34).

Foucault, he criticised the conventional “Marxist” dogma that enlisted the distinction “avant-garde-lumpen-proletariat” and which, having exploited a certain force of “excess” in its preliminary stages, then sought to reinstitute the corporate-state apparatus in a call to revolutionary “order.” For Guattari, this amounted to a “trapping [of] desire for the advantage of a bureaucratic *caste*,” (Guattari 2009: 42) thus producing a *technocratic revolution*. In this way, it is ultimately Debord’s “domain of strictly scientific knowledge” that is most served by an appeal to what is thus presented as the underlying *irrationalism* of “revolutionary organisation” – an irrationalism embodied in the “proletarian masses.” In so doing, the “Marxist” schematisation of base-superstructure is recast into a model of social psychiatry, between convulsive proletarian *Id* (driven by a formless desire for untutored emancipation) and rationalist, technocratic *Ego* (whose operations exploit and enchain it – including, it must be said, to an illusory idea of, precisely, *emancipation*).

For Guattari, “revolutionary organisation must be that of the war machine and not of the state apparatus, of an analyser of desire and not an external synthesis” (Guattari 2009: 46). This recasting of Debord, while maintaining the Blanquist line on revolutionary warfare, goes further in its critique of two prevalent aspects of “Marxist” dogma:

1. the criterion that revolutionary *knowledge* must become *power*;
2. the myth of a “revolutionary class” (of individual and collective agency).

This critique, which constitutes the basis of what, in *Anti-Oedipus*, Guattari and Gilles Deleuze term “schizoanalysis,” stems from a rethinking of historical materialism and (like Situationism) the “rationalist” basis of revolutionary ideology. Thus:

1. “Desire is Power, Power is Desire” (Guattari 2009: 282);
2. class consciousness is symptomatic, not constitutive.

“All societies,” Deleuze argues, “are rational and irrational at the same time,” yet Reason “is always a region cut out of irrationalism – not sheltered from the irrational at all, but a region traversed by the irrational and defined only by a certain type of relation between irrational factors” (Guattari 2009: 36). Accordingly, the social field is characterised by “the problem of delirium.” As Deleuze states:

The real problem of delirium lies in the extraordinary transitions from a pole which could be defined as reactionary or even fascist – statements like “I belong to a superior race” appear in all paranoid deliriums – to a revolutionary pole. Consider Rimbaud’s affirmation: ‘I belong eternally to an inferior race.’ (Guattari 2009: 58)

What’s most controversial about this statement, however, isn’t the implicit heresy vis-à-vis conventional “Marxist” notions of class consciousness, but rather its belatedness in applying to political economy insights derived from psychoanalysis which for quarter of a century had already been driving the rapid evolution of post-war consumer capitalism and “la civilisation technicienne.” This had, in its theory and practice of *unitary urbanism* and *psychogeography*, been at the core of Situationist activity for the previous decade, culminating in two documents of particular (though frequently unacknowledged) significance both in the genealogy of May ’68 and in its subsequent theorisation by Deleuze and Guattari: Mustapha Khayati’s “scandalous” brochure, published in 1966 by the Strasbourg students’ union, *De la misère en milieu étudiant* – which evoked “the most banal analyses of American marketing sociology: conspicuous consumption and advertising’s pseudo-differentiation of products otherwise identical in their nullity” (Khayati 1966) – and Debord’s 1967 *Société du spectacle* – which went beyond a critique of the ideological function of cultural merchandise in its impact upon individual and collective agency to expose a more radical *constitutive alienation*, of which agency (including class consciousness) is itself a symptom. Even in its molecular formulation, “class” and “caste” are ultimately *algorithmic functions*.

The genealogy of this system of regularised desire came to figure centrally in Foucault’s 1975 reflections on panopticism, drawing together the eighteenth-century utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham with contemporary articulations of social control founded upon a system of alienation, abstraction, individuation and normalisation (Foucault 1975). The pragmatics of this system in its post-WW2 consumerist iteration forms the basis of Adam Curtis’ 2002 documentary film, *The Century of the Self*, and provides a critical counterpoint to those narratives around 1968 burdened by anachronism. In Curtis’ narrative, the aftermath of fascist “mass hysteria” in European and suicidal Emperor-worship in Japan led to those old sociological categories tasked with explaining the behaviour of populations to give way to controversial new theories that dispensed with conventional ideas about individual and collective agency (negatively theorised as otherwise rational subjects of disinformation in Adorno and Horkheimer’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” [Adorno and Horkheimer 1972]) and focused instead on supposedly “irrational” psychological drives and the appeal of *self-actualisation*. Beginning with the “public relations” pioneer (and nephew of Freud) Edward Bernays

(who translated the analyses presented in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) into a hugely influential system of social propaganda and market manipulation), and extending through the work of Wilhelm Reich (who, in his studies of *Character Analysis* (1945) and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1946), sought to demonstrate the normative character of personal and group identity and the primary determining function of *libido*), the concept of class consciousness was displaced onto a fluid network of psychological “types” via what Alvin Toffler called “experience creators” (Toffler 1970).

These “types,” it was believed, could be produced by an array of seemingly contradictory signifiers and manipulated through a targeted appeal to “irrational impulses,” in such a way as to effectively negate or obfuscate Bakunin’s “irreconcilable antagonisms” of class consciousness (Bakunin 1985: 97). (“Desire on a social scale,” Guattari writes, “cannot be explained by a social rationality” [Guattari 2009: 54].) These precursors to contemporary micro-targeted social media provided, on the one hand, a measure of explanation for such phenomena as the appeal, for example, of fascism among large segments of the industrial proletariat, while on the other demonstrating the transition of post-industrial societies away from *alienated labour* towards *alienated individualism* and a universal credit (i.e. debt) economy in which exploitation was no longer a “class” privilege and which paradoxically maintained itself by a general appeal to emancipation-through-consumption. Enabled by the advent of television and the emerging science of informatics, this public relations “revolution” aspired to nothing less than a wholesale *engineering of consent* in tandem with *the permanent obsolescence of class revolution* in the West, thus paving the way for the post-’68 triumph of neo-liberalism and a global delirium of hypercommodification that, with the fall of the Soviet Union two decades later, would assume the exalted status (in Francis Fukuyama’s words) of an End-of-History.

While intimations of this revolution-in-counterpoint could be found explicitly in the writings of Siegfried Giedion, Vannevar Bush, Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan (among others), its implications were slow in penetrating continental political philosophy, which it accomplished only in part through Althusser’s synthesis of Marx and the psychoanalytic theories of Jaques Lacan (whose cybernetic recasting of Freud – despite, or perhaps because of, Deleuze and Guattari – remains under-examined). But perhaps the clearest formulation of this *other* revolution was given in a 1968 series of lectures on “the political order” at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, in California, later published under the title *Democracy in a Revolutionary Era*. In the course of these lectures, Harvey Wheeler proclaimed the *institutionalisation* of a “universal revolution” (Wheeler 1968: 14). What he meant by “institutional” was its *permanent integration* into the very logic of social organisation. By “universal” he meant an *architectonic science*: a politics of

“world order” as “the precondition for the survival of the species” (Wheeler 1968: 6). This politics, like the “revolution” to which it referred, would no longer be bound by the antagonisms of class or nation-state: competing humanisms of a passed epoch. Rather, it would be a global *cyber-politics*. Not merely a transitional phase in the history of industrialisation – in which “cybernation” would “break the dependency of organisational size and complexity on human nature and make it possible to conceive of a vastly expanded scope of control” – but a systemic transformation across the entire technological, and therefore *ideological*, infrastructure, permitting it “to centralise and decentralise simultaneously” (Wheeler 1968: 124-5).

In so doing, Wheeler’s “universal revolution” marked the closure of a process that had begun with mass industrialisation – reversing those relations “that had previously existed between science and politics” – and which had entered its dénouement with “the famous letter in which the atom bomb project was proposed to President Roosevelt... dated August 2, 1939” (Wheeler 1968: 104-5) (the End-of-History in prototype, soon to be duplicated by the Nazi rhetoric of Total War and the contending “triumph” of Scientific Socialism in the Soviet Union). The advent of the nuclear horizon, articulated during the Cold War arms race by the strategic doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (M.A.D.),² brought apocalyptic thought fully within the domain of technology, thereby completing the Humanist project of wresting control of the “cosmic design” from metaphysics. In M.A.D., the Machine Age fantasies of global (social) domination of and by humanoid robots transfigured itself into the spectre of autonomous “posthuman” agency evolving cataclysmically from a “critical mass” of technological power. What appeared strategically absurd in the form of such an “idealised (almost caricatured) doomsday device” (Kahn 1960), as Herman Kahn wrote in 1960 – subject as it still was to *political* considerations – rapidly transformed into a purely algorithmic problem, manifesting in the Soviet “Dead Hand” automated weapons-control system, in which human “decision-making” was replaced by pre-calculated scenarios triggered by an array of Earth-bound and orbital seismic, optic, radiation and pressure sensors.

In their abundant metaphors of “fail-safe,” “critical mass,” “chain reaction,” “runaway,” “unstoppable,” these systems described in prototype the lineaments of what has since come to be termed the *technological singularity* (that point beyond which the evolution of technology will no longer be humanly controllable: when, in other words, it will assume the characteristics of fully-autonomous agency) (Vinge 1993). They also represented a broader transition machine culture to artificial intelligence and the so-called posthuman, encompassed above all in the *universality* of

² A term, originally intended as a pejorative, was coined in 1962 by Donald Brennan (Brennan 1971: 31): “a Mutually Assured Destruction posture as a goal is, almost literally, mad.”

the Anthropocene.³ Yet despite the fact that this transition was everywhere visible, and increasingly verifiable, its manifestation on a political and social level occurred to a great extent under cover of a series of “bureaucratic readjustments” and “failed uprisings” – which in 1968 took place almost as universally – barely observed and almost entirely obscured by a competing sentimental history of “revolutionary action.”

2. The Impossible Raised to the Level of a Revolutionary Criterion

Reflected upon “in an environment of indifference” – the “calm we find ourselves in now” (Deleuze 2006: 308) – it has become customary to speak of the Paris student “uprising,” in tandem with the largest general strike in French history, in terms such as “the abortive revolution in May ’68” (Deleuze 2004: 216). In doing so, there’s an assurance of a certain historical agency having been at work: of a revolutionary idea having brought itself into being while simultaneously negating itself, the locus of its own “causality.” When the words *revolution* and *May ’68* are used in conjunction this way, something of the status of an event – which is to say of a certain “singularity” – is conjured forth. That singularities by definition contain multiplicities does nothing to discredit the affixing of the definite article to this “abortive revolution.” Its constitutive ambivalence asserts itself all the more thereby. Understood in this way, “1968” signifies a dialectical *revolutionary to counter-revolutionary* movement, from which the “indifference” of the 1980s is subsequently perceived to arise through a general consolidation of reactionary tendencies across Western society as a whole: the transition to neoliberalism. That “1968” acquires a certain historical fatalism in the retelling does little to detract from those narratives in which this “dialectical” movement is presented as a consequence of “the revolution” *failing to realise itself*.

What, then, do we speak of when we speak of this revolution that isn’t a revolution, but an abortion?

Deleuze and Guattari begin their short 1984 commentary for *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, “Mai 68 n’a pas lieu,” by suggesting that,

In historical phenomena such as the revolution of 1789, the Commune, the revolution of 1917, there is always one part of the event that is irreducible to any *social determinism*, or to causal chains. Historians are not very fond of this point: they restore causality after the fact. Yet the event itself is a splitting off from, a breaking with causality; it is a bifurcation, a lawless deviation, an unstable

³ A term most associated with Eugene F. Stoermer and Paul J. Crutzen, who adopted it in 2000 as an epochal geological designator of uniquely human impact upon the planetary ecosystem, including anthropogenic climate change (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000: 17).

condition that opens up a new field of the possible. (Deleuze 2006: 233, emphasis added)

For Deleuze and Guattari, the field of the possible “does not pre-exist, it is created by the event. It is a matter of life. The event creates a new existence, it produces a new subjectivity” (Deleuze 2006: 234). Revolutionary possibility is thus an immanence. In its analogy to both quantum field theory and to a dissident form of psychoanalysis, its eruption is “spontaneous” – evoking the production of matter and antimatter, or the operations of desire as the discourse of an “unconscious”: central tenets of their major response to “the reaction against ’68,” *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze 2006: 309) (Deleuze and Guattari 1977). In a lengthy 1977 discussion with Claire Panet reprising the genesis of *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze proposed that

Desire is... not internal to a subject, any more than it tends towards an object: it is strictly immanent to a plane which must be constructed, where particles are emitted and fluxes combine. There is only desire insofar as there is a deployment of a particular field, propagation of particular fluxes, emission of particular particles. (Deleuze 2006: 66)

This matrix of relations – between revolution, possibility and desire – is given a very explicit formulation: “there is no blossoming of desire,” Deleuze insists, “which does not call established structures into question. Desire is revolutionary because it always wants more connections and more assemblages” (Deleuze 2006: 58). The formulation Deleuze and Guattari arrive at for this matrix in *Anti-Oedipus* is “machinic desire,” or “machinic surplus value.” In so doing they bring into play a second matrix of relations, involving technicity and autopoiesis, within which “History” thus elides with a particular understanding of “technology.” In his preface to the Italian edition of *Mille Plateaux*, Deleuze stressed that the ambition of *Anti-Oedipus* had been to arrive at a “determination of those syntheses proper to the unconscious” and of “the unfolding of history as the functioning of these syntheses” (Deleuze 2006: 309). Above all, the unfolding of history with respect to “the aborted revolution in May ’68” which, as Guattari noted, “developed in a counterpoint that we found troubling: we were worried... about the future being prepared for us by those singing the hymns of a newly made-over fascism” (Deleuze 2004: 216).

And here lies a central problem of 1968. How to reconcile a conception of revolution vested in the singularity of the event with that programmatic contest over futurity which is at the core of its ideological struggle? For Deleuze and Guattari are not speaking of revolution in the abstract. “The revolution was possible,” Guattari wrote, “the socialist revolution was within reach. It truly exists and is not some myth that has been invalidated by the transformation of industrial societies” (Deleuze 2004:

216-7). But what if that were exactly the case? Moreover, what if the very “aborted revolution” that Guattari insisted was “possible,” “within reach” and which “truly exists,” were in fact a *fantasmatic symptom* of precisely that “machinic desire” *Anti-Oedipus* goes on to theorise in the wake of '68, by a *contrapuntal* movement of “pairing... productive forces and anti-productive structures”? (Deleuze 2004: 27). A “machinic desire” vested in an radical *ambivalence* – or what James Joyce, one of the presiding spirits of *Anti-Oedipus*, called *ambiviolence* (Joyce 1941: 218:02) – that is neither fascist, nor socialist, but rather pure “ideology” (not any kind of dogma but *the system of signifying possibility as such*)? In other words, that the idea of (aborted) revolution here occupies the position of a surplus value, a signifier, which “carries out the conjunction, the transformation of fluxes, through which life escapes from the resentment of persons, societies and reigns,” as Deleuze says – though in doing so he is referring to a certain status of *writing*, to “lines of flight,” to “deterritorialisation” (Deleuze 2006: 38). Symptom, writing, revolution. “Language,” Deleuze notes, “is criss-crossed by lines of flight,” yet “pragmatics... is the true politics, the micropolitics of language” (Deleuze 2006: 86). (Just as one might say that “Praxis is a network of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory relays one praxis to another”?) (Deleuze 2004: 206).

History written by language-machines is a palimpsest of “breakthroughs and breakdowns,” we are informed from the opening pages of *Anti-Oedipus*. These abortive or aborted revolutions describe what psychoanalysis calls a “transference”: “the always-incomplete character of the regressive and analytic process,” as Foucault says (Foucault 1998: 274). There are, Deleuze subsequently argues, no reducible “*functions* of language, only regimes of signs which simultaneously combine fluxes or expression and fluxes of content, determining assemblages of desire in the latter, and assemblages of enunciation in the former, each caught up in the other” (Deleuze 2006: 86 – emphasis added). In this way the question *What is revolution?* devolves onto the questions *What is desire? What is writing? What is language?* But also, *What is technology?* Since not only is technology (to invert the Deleuzo-Guattarian formula) *irreducible to machines*, but – via the “abortive” movement of transference in which this chain of substitutions (“What is...”) is inscribed – its operations produce precisely that zone in which “revolutionary discourse” finds its point of return and disappears into itself, as the (*epistemic*) *rupture* of “pure repeatability.”⁴

In “How Do We Recognise Structuralism?” Deleuze proposes that “sense always results from the combination of elements which are not themselves signifying” (Deleuze 2006: 175). This broadly epiphenomenal conception stands in a more or less symbiotic relationship to the work of “reification.” For Deleuze, the non-signifying elements that *produce* signification are contiguous with the idea of an unconscious,

⁴ What Merleau-Ponty characterised as “differences without terms” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 39).

itself *produced* by something akin to a “reification” of certain proto-cybernetic latencies in Freud. “The unconscious,” Deleuze insists, “is not a theatre but a factory,” it doesn’t *signify* anything (Deleuze 2004: 232). This derives from an assumption at the heart of *Anti-Oedipus* “that desire could be understood only as a category of production”: “Saying the unconscious ‘produces’ means that it’s a kind of mechanism that produces other mechanisms,” it has “nothing to do with theatrical presentation but with something called a ‘desiring-machine” (Deleuze 2004: 232). But this seeming epiphenomenality is given no grounding. Not only is the form of desiring-production an *immanence*, but the unconscious itself *has to be produced* (Deleuze 2006: 58).

What, then, are the conditions of such an interminable production – of desire? of the unconscious? of *desiring machines*? In other words, of *revolution* in a somewhat universalised “sense”? And is to speak of “abortion” in this relation thus to speak of a particular kind of non-production? A productive non-production, for example, of a certain non-theatricality? an indeterminacy of signification? a subversion of myth? (Theatre, Deleuze argues, speaks of *myth*, the *production of myth*, etc.). In other words, a “refusal to represent”? Or, to put it otherwise: What would the conditions be for this revolutionary language-machine to write itself without falling into genre? (The genre of “failed revolutions,” or worse, the genre of History?) Was the micropolitics stemming from *Anti-Oedipus* and inflecting in particular the new millennial discourse of Accelerationism then to (re)write the “aborted revolution in ’68” in such a way as to produce – by way of a myth of this non-myth – a quasi-historical open-endedness of its “event,” so as to forestall the “future being prepared... by those singing the hymns of a newly made-over fascism” and thus foreclose upon its own foreclosure? In other words, as a negation-of-negation of Fukuyamaesque No-Futurism? (Noys 2014).

At the heart of all these questions remains the dilemma of what Lyotard, in his 1979 report on the “postmodern condition,” called the *unpresentable* (Lyotard 1991). This “unpresentable” is two-fold: on the one hand, it occupies the position of an horizon of the impossible, which the End-of-History masks, since what it necessarily omits is the very possibility of an “end of capitalism”; on the other, it stands in the position of the “revolutionary signified” – not the *object* of revolution, but its *accomplishment*. Unifying this idea of the unpresentable is the figure of “technology” (“science”) at the service of a certain illusion of a “progress beyond” (since this “beyond” is by definition excluded from the world). As Debord noted in 1972, “the society that has every technical means to modify the biological foundations of the whole of life on Earth” nevertheless “cannot develop productive forces any further” (Debord 2003: §14-15, 20-21). This is only partially grounded in empirical considerations, since its real basis is ideological: the “science” expected to perform

the alchemical miracle of transmuting the Anthropocene into a cornucopia of unbounded futures is seen as inextricably linked to the problem it is tasked with overcoming. “Such a science,” Debord argues, “in thrall to the mode of production and to the aporias of *the thought* that this mode has produced, cannot imagine a real overthrow of the present scheme of things” (Debord 2003: §15, 22). Like some embellished monster dwelling in the margins of a Renaissance map, beyond this present scheme of things lies the “impossible.”

If this intractable “present” defines the totality of what is *presentable* within its field of discourse (a world “wholly contaminated by the superabundance of the commodity, as well as the real, miserable dross of spectacular society’s illusory splendour” [Debord 2003: §16, 24]), then the very logic of “revolution” itself must also be counted as having been internalised to it, not as a *rupture with the present* but as the *universalisation* of this rupture – marking the convergence of revolution upon that “point” which simultaneously renders it impossible and thrusts it into being. “The present and the future,” Debord writes, “are merely occupied by consumption turned revolutionary: in the immediate sphere, it is above all a question of the revolution of commodities, of the recognition of an endless series of *putsches* by means of which prestige commodities and their demands are replaced; beyond, it is merely a question of the prestige commodity of revolution itself” (Debord 2003: §37, 53). Correspondingly, the *impossible* is raised to the level of historical and revolutionary criteria. What presents itself as *abortive*, as a “line of flight” from the forces of totalisation, thus risks succumbing to the very opposite of what Guattari called an “escape from the impasse of capitalism” (Guattari 2009: 43) – which is to say: to a recapitulation of the logic of the capitalist desiring-machine; its on-going evolution by way of a “controversy shaped by the phoney tenets of economic science” given the status of the “ontologically revolutionary” (Debord 2003: §35, 46).

That this should all resemble something like a self-parodic schema doesn’t detract from the reality that the productivist line, from *Anti-Oedipus* to Accelerationism, has come to appear the line of least resistance, even if its movement is one of bifurcations, multiplicities and indeterminacies – for if anything these end up offering new “possibilities” for reterritorialisation within an otherwise depleted terrain. They have become, in a sense, the anachronistic shock-troops of the very “pseudo-cyclical model of untrammelled commodity production” (Debord 2003: §16, 23) they propose to escape or negate, motivated by what amounts to a repetition compulsion indistinguishable in all other respects from that of commodification itself. In thus acquiring ever more “historical aura” as the transcendental signified of anti-Capitalist revolt, the prestige commodity of 1968 – to which revolutionary discourse in the West has all-too-often since come to refer for a kind of cultural permission (like Woodstock, or the Apollo moon-landings) – becomes less and less distinguishable from every

other sentimental wasteland of “No Future,” populated by a race of its own reactionary abortions.

3. Epistemic Catastrophism: From Revolution to Phantasmatic Re-Production

On this question it is worth revisiting for a moment Debord’s post-68 critique, in which the political re-normalisation after May and the process of accelerated commodification is cast in the light not only of revolutionary abortiveness but of a re-mystification of what Soviet scientists were even then calling the Anthropocene – the totalised reification of “spectacle” in which the “gilded destitution” of every utopia accomplishes itself. “The *cumulative reality* of the production in question,” Debord writes, is “indifferent to utility or harmfulness” which, “far from slipping from view, returns in the form of pollution.” For Debord, this *return from the utopian future* – of production reified as pollution – “is thus the calamity of bourgeois thought” (Debord 2003: §16, 23-4). Moreover, it is a matter of *zero degree* of separation between this “calamity” and the “prestige commodity of revolution itself” returned from the dustbin as the very model of its own interminable recycling, from entropy to phantasmatic *re-production*. Bernard Stiegler’s recent *Negentropocene* is a case in point, in which historicism and an appeal to the “ethics” of counter-modernity (manual “work” versus “proletarianisation”) merely restores the potential of catastrophe to be an engine of abstract spectacular production. “The Anthropocene,” Stiegler argues, “is an ‘Entropocene,’ that is, a period in which entropy is produced on a massive scale, thanks precisely to the fact that what has been liquidated and automated is knowledge, *so that in fact it is no longer knowledge at all*, but rather a set of *closed systems*, that is, *entropic systems*” (Stiegler 2018: 51).

In response, Stiegler proposes an *epistemic catastrophism* as *counter-agency*: a quasi-Foucauldian anti-positivist positivism, in which “knowledge,” liquidated as “big data,” may still be reconstituted as an “open system” that “includes a capacity for dis-automatisation that produces negentropy (Stiegler 2018: 52). In his 1968 response to the Paris Epistemological Circle, Foucault argued that “Knowledge cannot be analysed in terms of knowledge; nor can positivity in terms of rationality; nor can the discursive formulation in terms of science. And one cannot ask that their description be equivalent to a history of knowledge, a genesis of rationality, or the epistemology of science” (Foucault 1998: 325). For Stiegler, the phantasm of an epistemic totality is thus brought into direct collision with the event of a global cybernetic system enlarged to the dimensions of an all-encompassing futurity, whose production is no longer History but entropy. In this, Accelerationism and Neganthropoetics are ostensibly equivalent: each premised upon the counter-futurity of Capitalism’s self-supersession; each desiring to reinscribe a mode of historical materialism, in which

catastrophe isn't in fact transcended but assumes the status of a transcendental signified. Or, if nothing else, the paradoxical insistence that the Anthropocene is, *in any case*, "unsustainable."

"If there is to be a future," Stiegler argues, "and not just a becoming, the value of tomorrow will lie in the constitutive negentropy of the economy-to-come of the Neganthropocene": an economy to be produced by the "forming and setting-to-work" of "motor affects" distinct from "dis-affected calculation, which in the twentyfirst century *becomes algorithmic*" (as if it hadn't been all along) (Stiegler 2018: 52-3 – emphasis added). Rather it is a matter of the "hermeneutic investment" of what Stiegler terms *traces*, of "differentiating from the new anti-political economy in and through a neganthropological *différance* whose operation *must* effect bifurcations – *after the default*" (Stiegler 2018: 267). United by a metaphysics of *default*, Negentropy and Accelerationism each objectify "revolutionary thought" as catastrophic agency; catastrophe as teleology. This dualistic movement parallels the internal *algorithmic* dynamics of the commodity itself, as simultaneous desiring-production and consumptive-waste, excess and pseudo-negation. In so doing, *sustainability* becomes a code word for a perpetual motion machine: operated, on the one hand, by a hyper-speculative futurism and, on the other, by a diachronically self-substituting present of "alternative" world scenarios. In the former, the Anthropocene is not only a *fait accompli* but the very instrument of emancipation; in the latter, emancipation can only arise from its amelioration: in both it's a question of *which* Anthropocene (negative or otherwise) is to be preferred, and in what ways the Anthropocene itself might constitute a technology of *de facto* re-evolution. The problem is the relation of this "technology" (as *instrument* of an implied historical subject) to an ideologically predetermined set of outcomes (neganthropocene, total communism, etc.), valorised by an appeal to the geological-real as reification of *hypercommodified excess*.⁵

In his 2016 "theory for the Anthropocene," *Molecular Red*, McKenzie Wark disputes the idea that the Anthropocene can be reduced to a geological *symptom* of collective human agency, insisting it can only be understood as a *situation*, to which theory must respond by firstly engaging with its different classes of organisation (Wark 2016). For Wark, any theory of the Anthropocene is fraught with uncertainties, not least of which are those stemming from the need to critique prior assumptions about the character of the "collective agency" of which the Anthropocene is supposedly a symptom – above all, the assumption that such an agency can (continue to) be called Capitalism – or that the quasi-revolutionary thought directed at its subversion, negation or

⁵ Like every collapse into singularity, the Anthropocene has inaugurated itself through a breakdown of the laws of physical semantics, thus giving rise to an ever-increasing number of "explanatory theories" concerned solely with its denial (pseudo-critical noise).

transcendence should, or can, be made to resemble the thought of May 1968 or its latterday cognates (the Anti-Nuclear movement, the Anti-Globalisation movement, the Occupy movement, the Anti-Austerity movement and so on, all in one way or another repeating the *incomplete project* of “1968”).

This is not merely a question of *passéisme*, but of a necessary recognition that the “prestige commodity” of May 1968 already, and from its inception, bore (however unwittingly) the mark of *counter-revolutionary spectacle*, behind which the desiring-production of Wheeler’s cybernetic “universal revolution” could itself be detected. Necessary because it is here that the critical impetus of its *abortiveness* resides: an abortiveness which permeates (indeed it determines) the entire project of *Anti-Oedipus*, persisting in the radical ambivalences upon which the Left/Right Accelerationist dichotomy has succeeded in erecting itself. Above all, how is the abortiveness of the revolutionary idea encapsulated in “1968” (immanent, spontaneous, foreclosed) to be reconciled to this *other revolution*: as (symbiotic) counterpart, contradiction, or subject – “internalised” to it in the language of *machinic surplus value*?

While the forms of abortiveness appear bound to the (avantgardist) dilemma of “third phase” revolutionary normalisation from within, or expropriation from without (“revolutionary ideas” that are permitted by the Corporate-State Apparatus as long as they have no consequences, beyond their commodifiability) – LES RÉCOUPÉRATEURS SONT PARMI NOUS!⁶ – it remains to be thought not, as Guattari says, as an *external synthesis* but on the same plane of immanence as revolutionary thought itself. In other words, not at the point at which revolution succumbs to algorithmic capture, but the social algorithm of revolutionary desire in its *genetic inscription* – wherein the historical materialist trajectory of revolutionary failure cedes to a stochastic materialism of re-evolutionary “metabolic rift.” Metabolic rift refers to ecological crisis tendencies under capitalism – an idea Wark develops from Marx (“the irreparable rift in the independent processes of social metabolism” [Marx 1981: 949]) – via the science fiction writings of Andrei Platonov and Alexander Bogdanov’s *tektology* – to describe a mechanics of “redistribution without return” which underlies the production of the Anthropocene, with its origins in the production of “Capitalist critique” after 1968. Yet where the Anthropocene stands as a kind of ideal, universalising horizon of post-68 “abortivist” thought of the various belated Accelerationist and Negentropological types, for Wark it points to a rift in the planetary code in which the very logic of “revolutionary agency” is itself implicated.

Since 1751, Wark notes, 400 billion tonnes of carbon have been released into the Earth’s atmosphere, while an estimated 1400 billion tonnes trapped under melting

⁶ Comité Enragés/Situationist International placard, 1968 – Gérard Berréby and Raoul Vaneigem, *Rien n’est finit, tout commence* (Paris: Alia, 2014), 281.

Arctic ice threaten to percolate up from newly formed lakes – a process already begun and visible from space. This radical redistribution of carbon isn't merely a symptom of a *world-out-of-balance* as a consequence of unregulated “anthropogenesis” – one which needs to be *aborted*, in order to conserve a status quo with “nature” – but a systemic re-organisation, whose base material character is brought into view through the disappearance of the Rousseau-esque human/nature dichotomy. Platonov, in a synthesis that recalls the anthropotechnics of La Metrie,⁷ is enlisted in service of the idea that “nature is actually labour... It is already working on itself in its poverty” and thus “joins a human poverty to that of nature, human nature meets nature's labour, of which it is a metonymic part, not a metaphoric double” – a line of argument that broadly accords with the loosely contemporary synergetics of Buckminster Fuller, cybernetics of Norbert Wiener, and mind-ecologies of Gregory Bateson in the West. In synthesising this approach with the idea of metabolic rift, the agent/catalyst relation is subverted in such a way that the classic Marxist base-superstructure schema is redrawn with carbon as the base and the Anthropocene as superstructure. The accelerated redistribution of carbon (ambivalent in its *form* to anything that might be called human design), produces a “surplus, over and above life” as “the production of the means of existence” (Wark 2015). In other words we are speaking of a generalised technicity.

Wark's critique here is partly vested in rethinking Debord's criterion of revolution as *knowledge converted into power*, by positing revolution itself as technology. By drawing out the proto-cybernetics of Bogdanov's “equivalence of experimental knowledge,” Wark dissociates the idea of revolutionary agency not only from the social rationality of class/caste but from an overbearing insistence upon epistemological hierarchies (constantly threatening to return in a proliferation of machines and schemas, as in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* – which might easily now be read as a forecast of late-stage proliferation in the military-entertainment complex, cyberwarfare, dronology, mass automated surveillance, data aggregation and other parasitic-aggressive forms of contemporary “social media”) and the politics of “World Order.” The drive to epistemological totalisation represented as the horizon of a “universal” cybernetics, on the other hand, seeks to reprise the movement of History as a calculus of ever-increasingly circumscribed probabilities. Between these two is thus situated a contest over what we might call the possibility of the possible: a “poetics” of stochastic materialism *constituted by the inherent ambivalences of binary/algorithmic logic itself*, by which the ideological determinations of the epistemic control system are susceptible to non-causal perturbation. The implication here is that Anthropocenic metabolic rift itself

⁷ See Julian Offray de La Metrie, *L'homme machine* (1747).

describes that field of agency (of “experimental knowledge”) commensurate with the “critique” of a World system of cyber-capitalism, etc.

The conversion of experimental knowledge *into a countervailing/subversive force* (to globalisation’s epistemic totality) is posited – not in relation to the future horizon of an *End of the Present in its interminable, post-historical “phase”* (the abortion of the World as the abortion of “Capitalism”), nor as *a feedback through a history of accelerated industrialisation* which has, in any event, *already* characterised State Socialism’s historical attempts to negate Western hegemony – but as a radical lability, in whose fluctuations the normed coordinates of historical antagonism have become disordered. This radical lability is indeed a war-machine, recalling (before Deleuze and Guattari) Blanqui’s poetics of cyclic redundancy and the “eventful irruption of the possible within the real” (Bensaïd and Löwy 2013: 35) (Blanqui 2013: 40): which is to say, the force of a subversion internal to modernity as phantasmagoric repetition, encountered – as Marx says – in the epochal illusion of an “End” (“the dictatorship of the fait accompli”) (Bensaïd and Löwy 40). Yet for the Anthropocene to be considered the latest (“ultimate”) term in the signifying chain of Modernity’s self-contradictions – superseding, thereby, the Nazi *Todeslager* as the defining image of “rationalist” excess – would simply duplicate the idea that “universal revolution,” like universal history, “has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive, it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time” (Benjamin 1968: 262). This would be equivalent to absolving its entire ideological system of any strategic operation, reduced to a mere accumulation of repetitions (as if the mode of universal history were *only* farce), from Ricardo’s “iron-clad laws” to *The Triumph of the Will*, the “Eternal Soviet” and the neo-liberal “End of History.”

But if the role of revolution is to produce the phantasm *in the real* and to repeat, as Foucault says, “the universal event in its extreme point of singularity,” then what is revolution if not “the event that befalls the phantasm and the phantasmatic repetition of the absent event?” (Foucault 1998: 353) – i.e. of History itself? This is the contradictory path that the “problem” of revolutionary thought – which presents itself (in its enactment) as a *rupture with History* – has paved for itself, from the necessity, among others, of drawing from Capitalism the resources for its critique and ultimately its negation. In the convergence of a certain teleology upon the Anthropocene – as itself the emergent “autonomous agent” of world-transformative-thought, in place of a “subject of history” (and finally in place of History itself) – does such a topology not represent *in extremis* precisely that encounter between the phantasm and event of which “1968” bore only as much resemblance as a prehistoric child’s toy? Not as some catastrophic symptom *avant la lettre* – of an imminent (and terminal) “technological singularity” – but as a rupture-of-antecedence, in the re-revolutionary form (universalised into a general condition) of the *im*-possible?

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