

Lockdown and conspiracy theories: inaction, transmission, stupidity

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1. In Ellis, D. and Voela, A (eds) (2021) *After Lockdown: Opening Up, Psychosocial Transformations in the Wake of Covid-19*, London: Palgrave.

This chapter discusses conspiracy theories that emerged during the pandemic as symptoms of our time. Conspiracy theories are discussed with reference to Lacan's concepts of the Capitalist Discourse and the Mirror Stage, Simondon's concept of individuation, and Stiegler's concepts of stupidity and proletarianisation.

Weird and wonderful poetics

The virus is an elaborate hoax¹. The virus was intentionally leaked from a lab in Wuhan. 5G masts emit radiation that weakens the immune system. *Proof* is posted online that 5G masts cause oxygen deprivation. Science fights back with video explainers discrediting the claims² but, once again, conspiracy theory proponents *prove* that some people are not duped. Against the powers of those who are supposed to know and pull the strings of our existence, the warriors of superior knowledge unmask the sinister entanglements of accident and intention, just as science fiction knocks on our locked doors (think of films

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/science/audio/2020/may/05/covid-19-the-psychology-of-conspiracy-theories?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

² <https://www.wikirise.com/2020/04/07/coronavirus-proof-5g-exposure-causes-oxygen-deprivation/>
<https://theconversation.com/amp/conspiracy-theorists-are-falsely-claiming-that-the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-an-elaborate-hoax-135985>

<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-are-dangerous-heres-how-to-stop-them-spreading-136564>

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/coronavirus-myths-scams-conspiracy-theories-true-false-lab-leak/amp/>

https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/may/01/why-the-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-is-false-video-explainer?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

like Contagion and books like Severance), joining forces with a rebellion against the very technologies that enable those who are *not duped* to spread their claims.

The weird and wonderful poetics of the pandemic conspiracy theories should not escape our attention. Inaction: being confined indoors, ordered and interpellated to do no-thing; the spectre of no thing (the invisible *it*) chiming with the global aporia about the *nature* of the virus, that ‘thing’ which so suddenly descended upon us out of nowhere. Transmission: trans-position of nature and technology. ‘It’ (the virus) sucks oxygen; telecom masts suck oxygen. Aggression from the virus; aggression from humans towards technology – we never managed to address our relation to technics, let alone to other species. Self-destructive behaviour: the body goes into overdrive duped by the virus; the non-duped break out in the streets, acting out, destroying, unleashing aggression. *Reason* falters. Reason is short-circuited into a metonymic caesura of meaning. Retreat from reason, from the undulating long chains of signification, of metaphor and interpretation. *Regression* to un-reason, and a huge deficit of trust towards truth, power and knowledge. *Slowing down*, the disruption of the capitalist economy that Virilio and others could only ever imagine as a subversive response to the relentless rhythms of consumption, has just happened, devoid of political agency. The unknown duration (how long will this last, what will become of us?) of the event amounts to another shock to the collective symbolic systems of the post-2008 economy. Once again, economic depression looms large. Yet it seems that what we find even harder to deal with is that glimpse of finitude and the brittleness of human life which we never had time to consider, once safely displaced on the invisibility of the frail old pensioner or the vulnerable other.

A shock or a spasm?

Complexities reduced to naïve certainties. It is easy to dismiss conspiracy theories and attacks on 5G masts as the thoughts and acts of misguided souls behaving like *a headless, leaderless (global) herd*, a herd whose immunity – and this is perhaps the most seductive of all caesuras of meaning – inheres the sacrifice of vulnerable individuals, a fact that jars with western individualism and the duty of care supposedly ensconced in the role of the State and other modern institutions.

Psychologists focus on personality traits of individuals susceptible to conspiracy theories when exposed to anxiety and a chaotic world; individuals who lack critical skills and struggle to evaluate evidence; the marginalised and the discriminated who want to affirm *us* (as a group) against *them*, creating a worldview by pulling together disparate facts boosted by substantial confirmation bias (Jolly, 2020). Yet personal traits are not enough to explain another interesting phenomenon, the mainstreaming of conspiracy

theories. Most pronounced in the United States at the moment,³ this trend indicates that what is at stake is **an epochal shift** which pertains to the relationships of the individual and the group and requires an appreciation of the wider historical, political and libidinal configurations of our time.

Addressing the wider socio-political context of the pandemic, Francis Fukuyama (2020) refers to the recent outbreak as **a shock**, probably necessary and bigger than the 2008 financial crisis, and possibly more capable of triggering a much needed re-evaluation of the political institutions and democratic participation that gave rise to both disaffection and populism in recent decades. Fukuyama refuses to hazard a guess as to which way things might go but openly anticipates the pivotal role of the pandemic in years to come, and what Stiegler would describe as its *pharmacological* potential of a situation, the capacity to destroy or cure, ascribed not to the event (or shock) per se but to the total sum of structural changes it might engender.

This pharmacological potential and the possibility of a positive outcome, however, are set against bleak epochal conditions, namely, the catastrophic effects of neoliberalism extended far beyond the economic domain. Stiegler speaks of a near-permanent state of shock (2015) which we can begin to understand by contrasting, for example, the ethos of the 19th century to the present, when it comes to the effectiveness of public systems. If the 19th century, he argues, was inclined to reducing the dis-adjustment of the technical and social absorbing the shocks of progress, the global economic war of financialization has mostly been a war against public systems. The outcome has been: ‘extremely weak social structures and a dangerous fragility of the psychic apparatus – that is, of reason’ (2015: 176).

The historical demise of the State and the socio-political safety nets, and the consequences of the destruction of the holding environment have been extensively discussed by psychoanalytic thinkers (e.g. Giroux 2005, McGowan, 2016). For others, like Agamben (2020), the treatment of the pandemic as an emergency follows in the steps of a *permanent state of exception* ushered in by the financial crisis of 2008, now giving rise to ‘a perverse vicious circle’ in which ‘the limitation of freedom imposed by governments is accepted in the name of a desire for safety, which has been created by the same governments who now intervene to satisfy it’ (2020). Agamben adds: ‘The other factor, no less disquieting, is the state of fear, which in recent years

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/conspiracy-theories-go-mainstream-inside-gop-n1063171>

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/saturdayextra/how-conspiracy-theories-went-mainstream/11485298>

has diffused into individual consciousnesses and which translates into a real need for states of collective panic, for which the epidemic once again offers the ideal pretext' (2020).

Convoluting relations of agency and power: Berardi uses the word *spasm* to refer to the prevalent mode of thinking of semiocapitalism, emphasizing the psychic responses to the routine violence effected by the dominant modes of production-consumption. Semiocapitalism is seen as a turning point beyond the age of humanism predicated on law, reason and necessity. Semiocapitalism operates on the subjugation of the *nervous energy* of society. In its all-encompassing potency it is absolute, that is, not limited. Semiocapitalism has effected a violent deterritorialisation of the bourgeoisie, once the backbone of 'traditional' capitalism, exposing them to previously unimagined financial and emotional precarity. Rejecting its inherent negativity does not work, as it always returns in the form of a crisis, leaving self-fetisization as the only mode of defence, which, in turn, becomes synonymous to crisis. Berardi refers to groups and tendencies, not individuals: 'In the current anthropological mutation induced by digital information technology and market globalization, the social organism is subjected to an accelerated deterritorialisation that takes the form of a spasm' (Berardi, 2015: 218).

A spasm, I would argue, is a fair metaphor for some of the responses to the pandemic, *another* logic, contra reason, which emanates from the economic and psychic formations of late capitalism. In that sense, I would further argue that both the lockdown and its related conspiracy theories are part of the same spasm, not just a caesura of space and time, but also of language as meaning-making and sense-making folding upon itself or descending into a spiralling sequence of mirroring of polarities and homonymies. Under such circumstances, doing what conspiracy theorists do, namely, assigning causal relationship to unrelated events and the serendipities of life on earth, the virus included, speaks directly to the *socio-political and libidinal structural relationships* that form the epochal environment of their response. And in such a context conspiracy theories reveal something awesome and scary about our time.

But do we really live at the end of times? We seem to have reached another turning point, at which the rends and folds in the spatiotemporal and economic fabric will have made it possible for us, in future anterior, to look back and interpret this moment. For now, however, the end of time does not look apocalyptic but repetitive and regressive, or to borrow Virno's expression, *a déjà vu at the end of history* (2015). Socio-political relationships are always in a state of flux even if we cannot see it that way. If 'simple minds' try to imbue them with certainties it is not out of cowardice but out of a need for security and solace, especially when futural imagination and critical-political agency are being curtailed. Stiegler (2015) uses the term *stupidity (bêtise)* to refer to the noetic regression prevalent in our times, to the abandonment of reason as bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment and of our faith in the politico-libidinal arrangements that imbued early capitalism. Regression, as understood by Stiegler, can be both *base and*

basic, both a degradation of reason and a return to more elementary forms of responding to internal and external challenges. Both chime with the death drive-quality of late capitalism and the frailty of social structures. Neither can be ‘cured’ by another shock, any more than by waving a magic wand. Thus, the political and critical task today, our collective epochal *responsibility*, is to consider ways of re-animating both reason and desire – the latter as different and distinct from the death drive which is prevalent in capitalism.

Contextualising conspiracy theories in this way allows us to observe points of maximum friction, the malaise beneath the surface and some of the most adverse cumulative effects of semio- or psycho-capitalism. When it comes to change, Stiegler, who is often described as a legatee of the Frankfurt School as much as a Simondonian (Gilbert and Roberts 2012), puts his faith in the unconscious, coupled with concerted efforts for the imaginative re-engagement with politics, arts and the institutions. Despite the bleak prognosis for our times, Stiegler advances a pharmacological theory (*theoria* as abstraction and overview) in which stupidity, regression, un-reason and proleratianisation (impoverishment qua loss of the noetic capacity of differentiating, desiring and thinking abstractly rather than as loss of material wealth) are ultimately reversible.

Below I discuss pandemic-related conspiracy theories from a combined Lacanian and Stiglerian perspective. I begin by discussing conspiracy theories as a recurring and diachronic psycho-social phenomenon of epistemic confusion exacerbated by deep structural changes in the significant symbolic formations of our time, known in Lacanian terms as the Discourse of the Master and its variation, the Discourse of Capitalism. Instead of pursuing a purely Lacanian analysis to the end, I turn to Stiegler who combines insights from Simondon, Derrida and psychoanalysis in a critique of contemporary modernity and a general philosophy of critical interventions which do not privilege the individual but the relationship between the individual and the group. Stiegler’s concept of stupidity (*bêtise*) allows us to explore, with much more clarity than Lacanian psychoanalysis in fact, the links between epochal tendencies, the importance of human acts and the interstices at which the new and the unexpected might occur. But the two theories, as I will argue, can be conjoined in an enhanced conceptual framework which ultimately upholds, not to say celebrates, the radical potential of the unconscious and the importance of the operations of *working through and interpretation* in dealing with apparent regressions like the pandemic conspiracy theories discussed in this chapter.

Beyond epistemic confusion

A short digression to conspiracy theories of the past reveals their psychosocial nature and development over time. In *Aliens in America*, Jodi Dean (1998) illustrates how the oval saucer links surveillance, religion, corporate capitalism and alien abduction, evoking a universe where everything is connected and out to get us, where there is nothing we can do to stop it (1998: 26). The alien – substitute virus and you might get a partial glimpse of the present – marks *the radical strangeness and unknowability* increasingly part of contemporary life and serves as the ubiquitous reminder of uncertainty, doubt, suspicion, and the fugitivity of truth (1998: 31).

Conspiracy theories are symptoms of their times: in the 50s, poor record keeping and an official obsession with secrecy produced a steady accumulation of half-facts and hesitations, which, despite the ridicule heaped upon UFO witnesses, had the reverse effect: suspicions that there really was something to hide. At the same time, two discourses, the scientific and the governmental-judicial, established the languages and boundaries in which UFOs would be debated. Proponents of the theory rejected the presumption that citizens should be reduced to “crazies”, excluded from serious discussions important to America’s security. Thus, ufology challenged official notions of what counts as true and whose words are credible. From the perspective of the dominant culture, ufology was silly. Nonetheless, precisely because it was outside the constraining equation of truth with security and identifiability, ufology was free to focus on the unknown, to indicate the limits of governmental authority and validate the experiences of witnesses without necessarily claiming that it could identify or establish the object of their experiences (Dean, 1998).

At the same time, and in order to be comprehensible to governmental and scientific authorities, UFO talk relied on their language and logic. Unable to equate the true with the predictable, identifiable, and containable, ufology *redeployed truth itself*. As a result, the resistance embodied in the UFO discourse was produced as an effect of ufology’s exclusion, an effect that resulted in two distinct strategies. On the one hand, a like for like comparison of popular wisdom as summed up in phrases like “Consider how badly we have handled the AIDS problem and you will get some idea of what is likely to happen with abductions” (Dean, 1998: 54). On the other, the adoption of the languages of science and law, installed as practices for producing the kind of knowledge that science disavows. Not only did the UFO discourse cite scientific standards of objectivity, impartiality, critical debate, and consideration of alternative hypotheses, but it also provided a location for the redeployment of these standards against institutionalized science. From within the UFO discourse, hegemonic science appeared too preoccupied with securing government funding, maintaining authoritative reputations, and defending its own paradigm of reality.

In the nineties technological innovations enabling rapid, widespread communication and access to information, started opening up new possibilities for the audience who witnessed the “conquest” of space on their television. Inevitably the interest in UFOs declined, especially as the cultural stress which had been on escaping the confines of earth, now became finding ways to stay (or return) home. With the advent of the internet, everything was brought to us, without ever having to go anywhere. We could watch and see more than what the government produces for our consumption. We could see most anything we liked.

Dean highlights the composite nature of conspiracy theories: the alien marks the way *rational procedures produce irrational results*. It marks a dissolution of the boundaries of the intelligible so complete that any exclusion seems arbitrary, and repressive. At the same time, and against a scientific priesthood, the individual is held up as an independent source of knowledge. Entertaining abduction becomes a *momentary popular enactment* of what it might mean actually to respect uniqueness and individuality. It is a *performative rejection of the circumscription of permissible*, public, reality. It is a rejection that ironically reiterates and claims as its own the terms of *ideal discourse* in a public sphere (Dean, 1998: 107).

Finally, Dean highlights the *epistemic confusion* that supports and is supported by the conspiratorial logic and, equally, by the fragmentation of reality into infinite isolated instances:

The differences in social and economic position, in historical privilege, in sex, ability, desire, in race, ethnicity, and language, in religion, belief, and philosophy, in ability, intelligence, and inclination, in information, knowledge, and access to technology that are called upon to be acknowledged, expressed, or respected point not only to differences in goals and values but to different experiences of the world, of the real (1998: 108).

I want to believe

From president Trump casting aspersions on Barak Obama's citizenship⁴ to QAnon supporters who believe that Trump will free the world from an international rig of pedophiles,⁵ conspiracy theories no longer circulate among marginal or amateur groups. They are publicly staged in entertainment and mainstream or popular media, and never cease to supply enjoyment to the public. Their proponents distrust the global systems of power and truth but are certain of dark plots no less universal: in fact, they embody what is most paradoxical about the ideological fantasy that subtends conspiracy theories, namely, *belief through disbelief*. Let us not forget that conspiracy theories exist side by side with gossip, fake news, rumor and myths, all of which pertain to the status of truth and knowledge, which, in Lacanian terms, is directly linked to the structural relationship between subjectivity, the Law and its transgression in the society of enjoyment. In our times the demise of symbolic efficiency (Žižek, 1999), that is the effectiveness of the big Other to operate as a cohesive and containing milieu, leaves us with a dys-functioning Symbolic order unable to support the desiring subject by conferring the much needed coherence upon it. It is no wonder, then, that conspiracy theories prevail as *symptomatic reactions* to an age in which new technologies and knowledge do not alleviate anxiety but turn out to be the source of uncertainty and threat.

Coherence or order, in Lacanian terms, is a 'trick' of the Discourse of the Master. In brief, in socio-political terms the master's power is self-authorized and derived from his own speech tautologically, grounding his authority in his word ('I am what I say') without any further justification. In terms of language, Lacan aligns the position of the Master to the operation of the psychoanalytic Master Signifier. The Master Signifier gives one a place in the symbolic order (think, for example, of one's first name as a place-holder for one's position in the family). Despite its inherent arbitrariness, the Discourse of the

⁴ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-obama-birth-certificate_n_867367?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb20v&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAMrZFKpmxnO-aE_luq9Tygh6Cl_IRHPI_YbyccfSHrcHG0z-U2HVmwvngqib_tlCmC30DdO3DgWR11A5RtEVbFoA225ZljVBzVkS2m1KOWsoSuROENgki-U0OU6Ggix7xngADsaFdr8uCo8kWluj7kTU-LjhZqhQjQjBYXep2Hsd

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-53507579>

Master is the founding gesture of every social link, providing a gravitational point which organizes the field of meaning around it. It lends credence, so to speak, to the so-called “objective world”, in a move which can only be described as an “under the table” deal we strike with the “paternal metaphor” (Other, symbolic order), accepting that everything works (*ça marche*) (Matijasevic, 2000).

But while the operation of the Master ensures that everything works, humans are besieged by an ontological crisis. This crisis is not immanent precisely because it is ontological (Vighi, 2015). Ideally subjects come to terms with the fact that the Other is not omnipotent and does not pull the strings of one’s existence. Coming to terms with the contingency of the Other is an important step towards subjective freedom albeit an often terrifying cost of such freedom bears, as comes at the loss of favorite illusions and the safety net they afford.

Lacanian theorists argue, that one of the biggest problems with capitalism today is that it does not address this ontological crisis but ‘papers over the cracks’ with an abundant offer of objects. Prohibition (castration) and lack are often cast aside (foreclosed), leaving subjects exposed to a short-circuit between mastery as a command to enjoy and various objects vying to cover the essential lack (*objet a*) which sustains desire (Žižek, 1998).

An epochal dis-tortion of the function of the Discourser of the Master, known as the Capitalist Discourse, exacerbates these effects. To put it crudely, if the Discourse of the Master once allowed subjects to construct a working symbolic order with relatively stable points of reference, this latest development undermines the conventions of stability. Regarding the difference of the capitalist as master from the traditional master, one could say that what is carefully hidden by the traditional master – that is, his/her doubts, uncertainty – comes to determine the capitalist master’s agency. If traditional masters impose their will on society whilst feigning self-certainty, capitalist masters can be seen to do so by constantly reminding others that, like all other mortal souls, they too don’t fully coincide with their master-signifiers and doubt the latter’s supremacy (Pauwells, 2019: 58).

It is easy to recall several examples of modern leaders that could fit the above description. The master who does not know is no less a master, yet, he seems to extend the same claim to ignorance as anyone else. What is at stake, Pauwells explains, is the inevitable failure of ideological interpellation – both imaginary and symbolic– to engage individuals **on a deeper human level** which often results in mobilizing defenses as the last line of resistance and, as such, safeguard[ing] precious individual

characteristics and creative capacities that are crucial for job satisfaction and productivity from being suppressed (Pauwells, 2019: 66). Thus, we might add, at desperate times ambivalence, projection and displacement join forces, revealing a world of internal and external catastrophe and, in effect, of a **short circuiting** of desire (and its subjections to the drive) of the most regressive kind. What is opening up, there, gaping and threatening, is the work of unmitigated **internal antagonisms** which is neither 'held' not ameliorated by the ailing symbolic order.

What kind of response does this inhospitable environment generate? Folded into the specific dynamic, the transgressive or subversive stance of conspiracy theories are already included within the above system, in the form of a phantasy (a willful scenario of imaginary origin and causal relations) aimed to cover up the internal antagonisms by displacing them on other or more manageable versions of reality. In that sense, conspiracy theories are a certain form of ideological fantasy, and, in Žižek's words, "*a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance*" (cited in Han-yu 2009 :174). But what is covered and displaced never ceases to return and disrupt the subject's reality.

Like Agent Mulder in the old *X Files* TV series, conspiracy theorists *want to believe*. Obsessed with detail, with the improbable and the unexplained, they can be suspicious of the Other (Master) but certain of the whole truth of the Other or the Other of the Other (an infallible, omniscient and controlling Master). It is not so much that they no longer believe, but that they "secretly believe much more than they are willing to admit, even if they transpose these beliefs onto (nonexistent) 'others'" (Žižek, *PD*: 8).

So far, I hope to have illuminated how specific epochal socio-political shifts have facilitated the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories as a prevalent means of supporting the fraying relationship with the Other/Master as the one who is supposed to know. Mirroring doomsday prophecies, there is a persuasive perception that old authoritative ideologies (science, religion, state) and all decisions-making processes and politics, are really in the hands of one malicious agency or another. For this lack of the shared phantasm of transparency and manageability, or the fragmentation of reality into infinite private ones, as Dean would say, there arise "conspiratorial fear, the most extreme form of political cynicism, where dissatisfaction winds up stabilized within a narrative" (Sterk, 2013, 854).

It is often claimed that the certainty of conspiracy theory lies in its utter lack of trust: "the only thing of which one can be truly certain is the deception with which rulers rule." (Pratt, cited in Sterk 2013: 854). Thus, at the end-times, when all the ideologies that were established and nurtured for hundreds of years are proven deficient, incomplete or obsolete, the only ideology still standing is the one about the conspiratorial nature of events. While this assessment reflects the epochal scenario fairly accurately, I would disagree with the outcome of certainty, especially when we consider the corrosive properties of the

capitalist discourse and the lack of dialectical tension between truth, desire and the Other. Folding into one another, certainty and uncertainty produce not mediation or dialectical negotiation but a spiraling oscillation and the warped ontological poetics with which we started this chapter. Certainty-uncertainty play havoc with reason/unreason and undermine knowledge and trust.

In that sense, the epistemic confusion characteristic of conspiracy theories becoming pervasive needs to be opened up as libidinal dis-arrangement (short circuit), polarization of reason and un-reason (savoir and noetic, not knowledge), and the real *passions* of truth, belief, credit and trust. At the same time, the paradox of belief and disbelief and the wavering between the one who was supposed to know but does not and his authority, systematically veils what should have been asked in the first place, namely, *what is really left out, what is not seen*, what *object a* comes into sight when we look away, as in the case of death (skull) in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, when one looks from a certain angle (see Lacan 1991).

The shifts we have just discussed are all epochal trends, not just individual tendencies. As the material and structural forces of late capitalism change, we are compelled to examine more closely the processes of stupidity and regression, as almost dominant libidinal trends of late capitalism. What do they latter reveal? What does it mean to be an individual and part of a group at the end of times? What kind of interpretation or intervention could address, among other things, the spread of conspiratorial thinking?

Changing configurations of reason, knowledge and desire

Drawing on Gilbert Simondon, Bernard Stiegler approaches the noetic and material effects of capitalism through the concept of *individuation*, the organic process linking the individual and the group which is both psychic and social in ways that transcends both. Process philosophy and psychoanalysis are, at times, strange bedfellows and a detailed discussion of their relationship does not fall within the remit of the present chapter. Here I wish to highlight some points of entanglement, to the extent that they shed light on the importance of the psychosocial in all its permutations, also showing how Stiegler's concept of individuation resonates with two important Lacanian concepts, the function of the mirror stage and the remobilization of the unconscious towards a better future.

For Simondon individuation is not reducible to knowing the individual. The latter is defined in relation to and through the pre-individual, a symbolic or noetic reservoir of potentialities inherent in groups in every historical epoch. The state of the pre-individual is a promise of becoming (transduction) and subtends individuation as 'a state of dephasing of being, whereby being is forced to disclose to itself the pre-individual tensions, in the form of information, which provide the condition for individuation' (Scott, 2014:

7). Simondon neither privileges the individual nor does he not imbue groups with the attributes of the individual. What he calls *the psycho-social* is the *transindividual*, as ‘a bearer of those pre-individual and impersonal forces which act as the charge for potentially new individuations’ (Scott, 2014: 14).

Simondon considers individuation as action and knowledge. We cannot know individuation as it lies at the margins of knowledge. Individuation can grasp itself in *active participation and in doing* and knowledge structures itself as an analogy between two operations of individuation, thought and being, constituting a mode of communication between them (Scott, 2014: 20). Following Simondon, Stiegler considers contemporary capitalism as the age of cynicism, alienation, moral crisis, atomization, skepticism, disenchantments, disempowerments, disillusion and decay. As the same time, the levelling of human experience by modern technics, an epochal change to which we did not have time to adjust, results in massive proletarianisation. The latter does not imply the loss of material wealth but the impoverishment of noetic systems. *Proletarianisation* is defined as the generalized exclusion from creative-aesthetic processes, the decline of the noetic, and ‘being formalized through a technique, a machine or an apparatus’ⁱ (Stigler cited in Hutnyk, 2012: 128). For example, television, mass entertainment and the internet produce conformity and a flattening of memory and time, a *hyper-synchronisation* resulting in the loss of the ability to *diachronize*, that is, to think in terms of the local, the historical and the discreet. The credit crisis of 2008 produced a deficit of credibility, and abundant mis-creance and dis-belief (Stiegler, 2015: 144). Consider all the above as *tendencies* of the pre-individual, rather than as statistical or individual facts.

Proletarianization as a condition of stupidity sums up the loss of the ability to theorize, abstract and interpret, to rise above the concrete and, therefore, to think critically. What is at stake today, according to Stigler, is a very specific kind of linking between the internal and the external world and between the individual and the group. Stiegler argues that it is characterised by the loss of the ability to project oneself beyond one’s situation, to ex-sist. In that sense, disaffected, indifferent, lazy, and, in our case, conspiratorial thinking, belies an inability to bring forth, express and give form (Deleuze cited in Stiegler 2015: 62), exposing a scar of desire (by a return to the drives) and a propensity to regress. This condition invites us to delve further into the *forgetting* of reason as an epochal challenge. For Stiegler, the postmodern, paranoid conspiracies ‘rebel’ against transcendental and autonomous subjectivity and reason as bequeathed to us by the *Enlightenment*, namely, critical judgement and ability to abstract. Not knowing does not impede action. On the contrary, action takes place ‘at the margins of knowledge’, at the borderlines of the *oubli* (forgotten, oversight) and the (ir)retrievable of both knowledge and desire. As a Simondonian Stiegler sees such loci as inherently pharmacological, potentially capable of giving rise to new and positive configurations of individuation and knowledge, especially when life problematizes itself and one experiences a decoupling

of action and perception (2015). For Stiegler the psycho-social always consists of dynamic possibilities (2015: 56), including regression.

Inter-individuality and the mirror stage

Stiegler uses the term inter-individuation to refer to a form of becoming which is psychic and social but not individuation or trans-individuation. Inter-individuation is a form of stupidity, when knowledge as skill and savoir is degraded (2015: 20) and rationalization replaces reason (2105: 133). Inter-individual stupidity, so to speak, is glimpsed and effected via action leading to (failure) of knowledge, where no communication between disparities is achieved, (even) when people experience dissonance. Another effect of inter-individuation is the misunderstanding of the causal chain (2015: 37), which Stiegler defines as an inversion of the sign leading to unreason (2015: 44). This, in my view, is clearly illustrated in the logic of conspiracy theories discussed in the first section of this chapter, a defective line of rationalisation which only *resembles* reason.

Interestingly, Stiegler uses the word *herd* to qualify the regressive becoming for the group, developing out of a tendency to return to forms of individuation which constantly polarize. Such groups, he notes, operate the psycho-technical milieu [...] as an animal society 'in which the psychic and the social de-compose (and dis-individuate) through being superimposed in an inter-individuality [...] which becomes more like a herd' (2015: 59). The herd does not open up to incompleteness (or the contingency of the Other in Lacan) as the fundamental principle of desire but tries to close the gap by hanging on to the deprivation it emits. However, the becoming-herd of stupid is systemically exploited by the capitalist system which soliciting [its] drives, further exposing reality and reason to de-formation of knowledge, massive inversion, lack of well-being.

Echoing Lacan and the function of the I in the mirror stage, Stiegler argues that base thinking approximates mirroring, especially the desire to identify with an image inherent in the operation of the imago (2015: 50). Yet, neither Stiegler nor Simondon are interested in the Oedipal consequences of the mirror stage inherent in Lacan's reading. Instead of that, they fix their gaze on an observation from the natural world pertaining to non-human behaviour, namely the mimicry and gregarisation of the migratory locusts with which Lacan illustrates homeomorphic identification (1998: 3). At an epoch of psycho-power, argues Stiegler, the projection of phantasmatic identities polarizes the inter-individual (2015: 60). The inherent narcissism of consumer capitalism as identification with an image and the inter-individual belie a limited capacity to individuate. Reduced to being-as-I begets stupidity. At the same time, and more pertinent to the proliferation of conspiracy theories via online headless groups, stupidity generates an inter-individual

modality qua mimetic contagion and the purely social of animals (60). In such formations, what conditions the formation of the I as a narcissistic structure gets a glimpse of itself in the mirror of other similarly inter-individual structures (2105: 60). A cultural example of this behavior would be the amplification of polarizing views in media echo-chambers. And yet, the proliferation of communications leaves individuals in terrible isolation (Stiegler, 2015: 92) mainly because ‘communicative interaction has been reduced to a pulp’ (ibid). If I am appropriating Stigler’s words at this point, written with a much larger epochal malaise in mind and well before the pandemic, it is because the present crisis lends itself to another spiraling exacerbation of a bio-political spasm.

Towards a better future? Our responsibility

Stiegler believes that the mobilization of the unconscious offers ways of imagining and creating the conditions for a better future. Before we examine this proposal, let us contemplate what the ‘terrible isolation’ which characterizes our times might correspond to in the Lacanian register, with reference to the field of vision and the organisation of culture as discussed in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1991). Lacan uses the visual diagram to express the way in which the eye (I) emplaces itself in the field of objects (see pp. 144-145). Positioned outside the array of mirrors and objects but in such a way as to have an overview of them, the eye can ‘compose’ an image which harnesses the drive and allow it to endow the ensemble with libidinal investment. Lacan notes that a change in the inclination of the mirrors produces different effects of seeing. The array of mirrors corresponds to culture and the changes of their inclination correspond to cultural changes. The eye/I can therefore invest in culture and, in turn, can see itself as part of it.

Considering the seismic ruptures of later capitalism, to which the pandemic added a ‘natural’ dimension, we might want to ask the following question: what happens when the mirrors sway too much and the eye can no longer see an image? The crisis of 2008 produced an emblematic articulation of another version of this predicament, the ontological insecurity resulting from the financial meltdown, successfully summed up by Lazzarato’s (2012) term *the indebted man*. After the indebted man, and still enslaved to the power of an incoherent master, who does not know what to do in the pandemic any better than the average man, the eye catches a glimpse of nothing but its own death qua itself missing from the picture, and an exacerbation of poor psycho-symbolic optics. This is the *expendable* man who does not see himself anywhere (in the processes of power, governance or creativity) but as a digit in the daily death statistics. The logic of disposability (Stiegler 2015), an exacerbation of indebtedness and enslavement, begets panic. Panic begets spasmodic reaction and disenchantment; a short-circuit of the death drive.

The lockdown and the pandemic afforded us a glimpse of what we *did not know*, the limitations of science, what we did not wish to know and the psychic relations which cannot be grasped but at *the margins of knowledge* where something else appears beyond the concrete realities of living. For many the pandemic became the locus *where life problematizes itself*, touching on the un-known (knowledge as *savoir* and *connaissance*) and leading, in equal measure, to epiphanies and experiences of psychic catastrophe. In that context, the *bêtise* of conspiracy theories reveals not the stupidity of certain people as lack of reason or rationalization but, more importantly, a *not knowing* how to think, chiming with the horror of becoming expendable, in-significant.

There are no easy imaginative and positive ways ahead, even by Stiegler's faith in the pharmacological potential of regression and de-individuation. If individuation comes into being by being reinvented recollected (2015: 143), tackling conspiracy theories requires a change of structures in such a way that action creates a veritable relation between 'the anteriorly individual and its new charge of information' (2-15: 165), in other words, between the past and the present. Borrowing liberally from psychoanalysis and the Frankfurt School (see, for example Marcuse, 1987), Stiegler proposes re-igniting long circuits of desire and knowledge that is, the metaphorical unfurling of signification and meaning contra the shortcuts of the death drive, stupidity and the suffering of becoming expendable. If that is to be the case, then our collective task is to remember and interpret, finding ways to reconnect that which eludes us and abstracts itself from the circuits of irrational consumption (of knowledge and objects) and narcissistic inertia. The operations of *working-through and interpreting* are central to psychoanalysis. Coupled with concerted effort of reconstituting conscious knowledge in the form of artistic and cultural creativity and active political participation (see Stiegler 2014), it amounts to embarking on a new epoch. Imaginative or utopian as this might sound, the disparities and inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic showed that we have reached a point at which we need to consider bold solutions.

In the above context, opening up does not only require coming to terms with the incompleteness of the big Other and, ultimately, the knowledge that no one pulls the strings of our existence, but being able to act with-others in order to effect psycho-social individuation and change. A first step would be to challenge and dismantle conspiracy theories not by offering reason – anyone who has spoken to an advocate of conspiracy theories knows that reason does not work – but by asking 'what is good?' in the specific formulations (see Stiegler 2015: 129), chipping away at that 'good' (object) a conspiracy theory provides whilst linking-with others in order to heal 'the scar of desire' by creating a holding environment in the Winnicottian sense, in lieu of the collapse of the state and the operations of the symbolic.

I would argue that opening up as re-finding, re-inventing and re-thinking the future sound plausible when the desired aims of autonomy and reason are mediated by *responsibility*. Responsibility, in the Derridean sense at least, entails care for the other but is also *tremendous*:

enormous, extraordinary, impressive, exciting, or even fantastic, but also dreadful and frightening. It should make us tremble (Vrablikova, 2016). This is a responsibility for everyone but especially resonant with critical educators (not purveyors of knowledge). Against the proletarianisation and commodification of knowledge we may wish to embark on an imaginative exploration of desire and becoming which juxtaposes imagination, irreverent wit, theoretical thinking and holding-containing to commodification of knowledge, rationalization and psychco-social annihilation.

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ⁱ 'Proletarianised libidinal economy' means that 'the rate of profit no longer has to do with a credit crisis, but is rather the consequence of a culture of corruption, where capital becomes mafia-esque and dominant, and Freud-esque consumption-drive is no longer to be understood in relation to the equation 'production equals surplus over constant and variable cost of production' (Hutnyk, 2012: 143).