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How to heal a depression?

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At the end of the year 2008 the global economy collapsed. It’s hard to say what will happen next, but it’s easy to guess that the recession is not going to go away anytime soon. The collapse of the global economy can be read as the comeback of the soul. The perfect machine of neoliberal ideology is falling to bits because it was based on the flawed assumption that soul can be reduced to mere rationality. The dark side of the soul, fear, anxiety, panic and depression has finally surfaced after looming for a decade in the shadow of the much-touted victory and promised eternity of capitalism. In this essay I want to consider two different meanings of the word depression. By this word we mean a special kind of mental suffering, but also the general shape of the global crisis that is darkening the historical horizon of our times. We are not dealing here with a linguistic trick; we are not dealing only with a metaphor, but with the interweaving and interacting of psychic flows and economic processes.

In the year 2000 the US market experienced the effects of overproduction in the field of info-economy. After the dotcom crash and the breakdown of large corporations like World.com, Enron and so on, US capitalism changed course, and the economy of virtual production gave way to the war economy (Marazzi 2008).

Thanks to the war, the economy restarted, but the cost of labor continued to fall, and economics growth was based on the expansion of the debt of the families and the state. The overproduction crisis did not go away, and reappeared in 2008 after the subprime crisis triggered the most astounding financial crash. The events of economic and psychic depression have to be understood in the same context, because they are interrelated. Not only because they are feeding each other, but also because psychoanalytic theory has something to teach social thinkers, and psychotherapy may suggest very useful methods for the process of social transformation.

Neoliberal ideology is based on the idea that the economy can be conceived as a balanced system of rational expectations and investments. But in the social space of the economy not all expectations are rational, and not all the investments are purely and mathematically economic. Desire is involved in this process, and the unconscious is speaking in the backstage of any act of investment, consumption and economic exchange. This is why the supposedly perfect balance of the market has become a catastrophic mess. Euphoria, competition, exuberance were involved in the dynamics of the market in the bull years. Panic and depression were denied, but they were always at work. Now they are resurfacing and disturbing the normal flow of capitalist valorization. Semiocapitalism, the production and exchange of semiotic materials for capitalist production, has always exploited the soul, as a productive force and as a market place. But the soul is much more unpredictable than the muscular workforce which was at work in the assembly line. In the years of the Prozac economy the soul was happy to be exploited. But this could not last forever. Soul troubles first appeared in the last year of the dotcom decade, when the techno-apocalypse was announced under the name of

millennium bug. The social imagination was so charged with apocalyptic expectations that the myth of the global techno-crash created a thrilling wave all around the world. Nothing happened in the millennium night, but the global psyche teetered on the brink of an abyss.

In that period Alan Greenspan was talking of irrational exuberance in order to pinpoint the dangerous effects of emotional disturbances in the field of the financial markets. But the emotional disturbances were not accidental, a contingent or temporary phenomenon: they were the effect of the hyper-exploitation of the psychic energy, collateral damage: an unavoidable consequence of the soul at work. Actually it is impossible to avoid the spreading of emotionality, it is impossible to avoid the effects of psychopathology, as the nervous energies of the cognitarian workforce is submitted to unremitting info-stimulation. The fear of a depression materialized in the spring of 2000, when the virtual economy suddenly was jeopardized by the plunge in the tech sector of the stock market. The dotcom bubble burst and the overall economy was so deeply shocked that the voice of depression started to spread in the world.

Would you try to heal a coming psychic depression with amphetamine pills, with a shock therapy psychopharmacology? Only a foolish doctor would do this. But the foolish doctor happened actually to sit in the White House, and pharmacological-militaristic therapy was prescribed by George W Bush: war, tax reductions for the wealthy, invitation to go to shopping, and an unprecedented increase in private debt and in public debt. A campaign was launched worldwide against the collective intelligence, against the freedom of research, and against the public school. In the long run healing depression with artificial euphorization cannot work and sooner or later the depressed

organism will collapse. The emphasis on competitive life-styles, the permanent excitation of the nervous system prepared the final collapse of the global economy which is now unfolding under the eyes of the astonished mankind. The neoliberal idea of a balance between the various components of the economic system was a flawed theory because it did not consider the systemic effects of the social psyche. Therefore the bipolar economy went from euphoria to panic and is now teetering on the brink of a deep depression.

Beyond our knowledge

Economists and politicians are worried: they call it a crisis and they hope this is going to evolve like the many previous crises, seeping away, leaving capitalism stronger. I think this time is different. This is not a crisis but the final collapse of a system that has been lasting for five hundred years. Look at the landscape: the big powers of the world are trying to rescue the financial institutions. But the financial collapse has already affected the industrial system, demand is falling, and jobs are lost by the millions. In order to rescue the banks the state is obliged to take money from the taxpayers of tomorrow, and this means that the demand is going to fall further in the coming years. Family spending is plummeting and consequently much of the industrial production is going to be dismissed.

In an article published by the International Herald Tribune the moderate-conservative David Brooks writes: “I worry that we are operating far beyond our economic knowledge.” This is the point: the complexity of the global economy is far beyond any knowledge and governance. Presenting the Obama’s rescue plan on February 10th, 2009, the Secretary of Treasury, Timothy Geithner, said

> I want to be candid. This comprehensive strategy will cost money, involve risk and take time. We will have to adapt it as conditions change. We will have to try things we've never tried before. We will make mistakes. We will go through periods in which things get worse and progress is uneven or interrupted.

Although these words show the intellectual honesty of Geithner, and the impressive difference of the new leading American class compared to the Bushites, they point out the breakdown of political self-confidence.

The political and economic knowledge inherited from modern rationalist philosophy is useless because the current collapse is the effect of the infinite complexity of immaterial production and of the incompatibility or unfitness of the General Intellect in the framework of capitalist governance and private property. Chaos (i.e. a degree of complexity which is beyond the ability of human understanding) is the new king of the world, as far as chaos means a reality that is too complex to be reduced to our current paradigm of understanding. The problems that the world is facing nowadays cannot be solved in the framework of economic rationality. The capitalist paradigm can be no more the universal rule of human activity.

We should not look at the current recession only from an economic point of view. We must see it as an anthropological turning point that is going to change the distribution of world resources and power. The model of unlimited growth has been deeply internalized, pervading daily life, perception, needs, and consumption styles. But that model of growth is over and will never be back, not only because people will never be able to pay for the debt accumulated during the past three decades, but also

because the physical planetary resources are close to exhaustion and the social mind is close to breakdown.

Catastrophe and morphogenesis

The ongoing process cannot be defined as a crisis. Crisis means destructuration and restructuration of an organism that is able to maintain its functional structure. I don't think that we will see any re-adjustment of the capitalist global structure. I think that we have entered a major process of catastrophic morphogenesis. The capitalist paradigm, based on the linkage between revenue and work performance is unable to frame (semiotically and socially) the existing form of the General Intellect. In the 1930s the possibility of a New Deal laid in the availability of physical resources and in the possibility of increasing the demand and consumption. All that is over. The planet is running out of natural resources and the world is heading towards an environmental catastrophe. The present economic downturn and the in oil prices are feeding the depletion and exhaustion of physical resources of the planet.

At the same time we cannot foresee any boom in individual consumption, at least in western societies. So it's nonsensical to expect the end of this crisis, nonsensical to expect a new policy of full employment. No full employment in the future. The crash in the global economy is not only the effect of the end of the financial bubble. It is also and mainly the effect of the burst of the work bubble. We have been working too much during the last five centuries. This is the simple truth. Working so much has implied an abandonment of vital functions of the social environment, has implied a commodification of language, affection, teaching, therapy and self-care. Society does not need more work, more jobs, or more competition. On the contrary, we need a huge cutback in

work-time, a huge liberation of life from the social factory, in order to remake the fabric of social relationships. Ending the linkage between work and revenue will make possible a huge release of energy for social tasks that can no longer be conceived as a part of the economy and should create new forms of life.

As demand shrinks and factories close people suffer from the lack of money and cannot buy everyday necessities. This is a vicious circle that economists know very well but are completely unable to break because it is the double bind that economy is doomed to feed. The double bind of overproduction cannot be solved by economic means but only by an anthropological shift, by the abandonment of the economic framework of revenue in exchange of work. We simultaneously have an excess of value and a shrinking of demand. A process of redistribution of wealth is urgently needed. The idea that revenue has to be the reward of a performance is a dogma we must absolutely get rid of. Every person has the right to receive the amount of money that is needed for survival. And work has nothing to do with this. Salary is not a natural thing but the product of cultural moulding of the social sphere: linking survival and subordination to the process of exploitation was a necessity of the capitalist growth. Now we need to allow people to unfold their knowledge, intelligence, and affect. This is the wealth of today, not compulsive useless labour. Until the majority of mankind are freed from the linkage of revenue and work, misery and war will be the rule of social relationships.

How to heal a depression?

Although seldom using, if ever, the "D" word, Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, say very interesting things on the subject in their last book *What is philosophy?* and Guattari's last, *Chaosmosis*. In the

final chapter of *What is philosophy?* they speak of chaos. Chaos, in their words, has very much to do with the acceleration of semiosphere, and with the thickening of the info-crust. The acceleration of the surrounding world of signs, symbols and info-stimulation is producing panic. Depression is the deactivation of desire after the panic acceleration. When you are no more able to understand the flow of information stimulating your brain, you tend to desert the field of communication, disabling intellectual and psychic response: "Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into other that we no longer master" (1994).

We should not see depression as a mere pathology, but also as a special form of knowledge. James Hillmann says that depression is a condition of mind close to the knowledge of vanishing and dying. Suffering, imperfection, senility, and decomposition: this is the truth that you can see by the point of view of depression. In the introduction to *What is philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari speak of friendship. They suggest that friendship is the way to overcome depression, because friendship means sharing a sense, sharing a view and a common rhythm: a common refrain (*ritournelle*), in Guattari's parlance.

In *Chaomosis* Guattari speaks of "heterogenetic comprehension of subjectivity." Guattari describes the work of Daniel Stern, who Guattari says

> has notably explored the pre-verbal subjective formations of infants. He shows that there are not at all a matter of stages in the Freudian sense, but of levels of subjectivation which maintain themselves in parallel through life. He thus rejects the overrated psychogenesis

> of Freudian complexes, which have been presented as the structural universals of subjectivity. Furthermore he emphasizes the inherently trans-subjective character of an infant's early experiences. (1995).

The singularity of psychogenesis is central in the schizoanalytic vision of Guattari. This implies also the singularity of the therapeutic process.

> It's not simply matter of remodeling a patient's subjectivity – as it existed before a psychotic crisis – but of a production sui generis... these complexes actually offer people diverse possibilities for recomposing their existential corporeality, to get out of their repetitive impasses and, in a certain way to resingularize themselves (1995: 6-7).

These few lines must be read, in my opinion, not just as a psychotherapeutic manifesto but as a political manifesto as well.

The goal of schizoanalysis is not, in Guattari's words, to re-install the universal norm in the patient's behavior, but to singularize him/ her, to help him/her becoming conscious of his difference, to give him/her the ability to be in good relationship with his singular being and actual possibilities.

When dealing with a depression the problem is not to bring the depressed person back to his/her normality, to reintegrate behavior in the universal standards of normal social language. The goal is to change the focus of his/her depressive attention, to re-focalize, to deterritorialize the mind and the flow of expression. Depression is based on the stiffening of existential refrain, on the obsessive repetition of the stiffened refrain. The depressed person is unable to go out, to leave the repetitive refrain and s/he goes and goes

again in the labyrinth. The goal of the schizoanalyst is to give him/her the possibility to see other landscapes, and to change the focus, to open some new ways of imagination. I see a similarity between this schizoanalytic wisdom and the Kuhnian concept of paradigmatic shift when the scientific knowledge is taken inside a conundrum.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) Kuhn defines a paradigm as "a constellation of beliefs shared by a group of people." A paradigm may therefore be seen as a model that gives way to the understanding of a certain set of reality. A scientific revolution in Kuhn's vision is the creation of a new model that fits better in the changing reality than the previous models of episteme. The word episteme in the Greek language means to stand in front of something: the epistemic paradigm is a model that gives us the possibility to face reality. Paradigm is the bridge that gives the friends the ability to go beyond the abyss of non-being.

Overcoming depression implies some steps: deterritorialization of the obsessive refrain, re-focalization and change of the landscape of desire, but also the creation of a new constellation of shared beliefs, the common perception of a new psychic environment, and the construction of a new model of relationship. Deleuze and Guattari say philosophy is the discipline that involves creating concepts. In the same way they argue that schizoanalysis is the discipline that involves creating percepts and affects, through the deterritorialization of the obsessive framework.

The schizoanalytic method should be applied as a political therapy in the current situation: the bipolar Economy is falling into a deep depression. What happened during the first decade of the century can be described in psychopathological terms, in terms of panic and depression. Panic happens when things start going too fast around,

when we can no more grasp their meaning, for instance their economic value in the competitive world of capitalist exchange. Panic happens when the speed and the complexity of the surrounding flow of information exceed the ability of the social brain to decode and to forecast. In this case desire withdraws its investments, and this withdrawal gives way to depression. Here we are, after the subprime crack and the following global collapse. Now what?

The economic collapse cannot be faced with the tools of the economic thought, because economic conceptualization is the problem and cannot be the solution. The narrow dependency of revenue on labor, the fanatic pursuit of growth – the dogmas of compatibility and competition: these are the pathogenic features that social culture must get rid of if we want to come out of depression. In the dominant political discourse coming out of depression means restarting the dynamic of growth and consumption, which they call recovery. But this is impossible because the debt cannot be paid, and because the planet cannot support a new phase of capitalist expansion. The economy of growth is the poison; it cannot be the antidote.

During the last ten years the French anthropologist Serge Latouche has been talking of *decroissance* (degrowth) as a political goal. But now the *decroissance* is given: when the Gross National Product is falling everywhere and some parts of the industrial system are crumbling and demand is plummeting, we can say that un-growth is no more a program for the future. Degrowth is here. The problem is that social culture is not ready for this, because social organization is based on the idea of unending expansion of the consumption and of the Gross National Product, and the modern soul has been shaped by the concepts of privatization and by the affects of an unending enhancement of consumption.

The very notion of wealth has to be reconsidered: not only the concept of wealth, but the perception of being rich. The identification of richness and acquisition is deeply embedded in the social psyche and in the social affect as well. But a different perception of richness is possible, one that is based on enjoyment, not with possession. I'm not thinking of an ascetic turn in the collective perception of wealth. I think that sensual pleasure will always be at the foundation of wellness. But what is pleasure? The disciplinary culture of modernity has equated pleasure and possessing. Economy has created scarcity and privatized need on the cultural level, in order to make it possible the process of capitalist accumulation. But here also lies the source of the present depression.

Unending process of therapy

We should not expect a swift change in the social landscape, but rather the slow surfacing of new trends: communities abandoning the field of the crumbling dominant economic, more and more individuals giving up their research for a job and creating extra-economic networks of survival. The very perception of wellbeing and of richness will change in a sense of frugality and freedom.

The de-privatization of services and goods will be made possible by this much-needed cultural revolution. This will not happen in a planned and uniformed way, but rather will be the effect of the withdrawal of singular individuals and communities, and the creation of an economy of shared use of common things and services and liberation of time for culture, pleasure and affection.

The identification of wellbeing and private property is so deeply rooted that we cannot absolutely rule out the barbarization of the

human environment. But the task of the General Intellect is exactly this: running away from paranoia, creating zones of human resistance, experimenting with autonomous forms of production based on high tech low energy production, and addressing the majority of population with the language of therapy much more than with the language of politics.

Politics and therapy will be the same activity in the coming time. People will feel hopeless and depressed and panicking because they are unable to deal with the post-growth economy, and because they will miss the dissolving modern identity. Our cultural task will be attending those people and taking care of their insanity, and showing them the way of an adaptation, of a happy adaptation at hand. Our task will be the creation of social zones of human resistance, intended as zones of therapeutic contagion. Capitalism will not disappear, from the world landscape, but it will lose its role of all pervading paradigm of semiotization, it will become one of the many forms of social organization. Communism will never be the principle of a new totalization, but one of the possible forms of autonomization from capitalist rule.

In the 1960s Cornelius Castoriadis and his friends published a magazine whose title was: *Socialisme ou barbarie*. But you remember that in "Rhizome," the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the disjunction (or...or... or) is the dominant mode of the Western Metaphysics that we are trying to forget. They oppose to this method of disjunction their method of conjunction:

> A rhizome has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be", but the fabric of the

> rhizome is the conjunction, "and ... and ... and ..." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be" [...] to establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings (1987).

The process of autonomization has not to be seen as *Aufhebung*, but as therapy. In this sense it is not totalizing and it is not intended to destroy and abolish the past.

In a letter to Sigmund Freud, the young psychoanalyst Fliess asked when is it possible to consider a therapy over, and the patient can be said 'you are OK.' Freud answered that the psychoanalysis has reached its goal when the person understand that the therapy is an unending process. The process of autonomization is an unending process, in the same sense.

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