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The pathologies of hyper-expression

Discomfort and repression

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Whether directly or indirectly, Sigmund Freud's notion of repression largely influenced the anti-authoritarian thought of the 20th century; he best explains it in *Civilisation and its discontents*[i].

> We cannot fail to be struck by the similarity between the process of civilisation and the libidinal development of the individual. Other instincts are induced to displace the conditions for their satisfaction, to lead them into other paths. In most cases this process coincides with that of the sublimation (of instinctual aims) [...]. It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilisation is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means?) of powerful instincts. This 'cultural frustration' dominates the large field of social relationships between human beings. As we already know, it is the cause of the hostility against which all civilisations have to struggle (Freud, 1929: 34).

Freud regards repression as an unwavering and constitutive trait of social relations. During the 20th century, between the 1930s and 1960s, European critical theory interrogated the relationship between the anthropological aspect of alienation and the historical character of liberation. On the one hand, in the *Critique of dialectical reason* (1964), Jean Paul Sartre recognised the anthropologically constitutive – and hence insuperable – character of alienation. On the other hand, the historicist and dialectical variant of Marxist theory regarded alienation as a historically determined phenomenon that could be overcome through the abolition of capitalist social relations. In his 1929 essay, whilst criticising the naivety of dialectical thinking, Freud anticipated the main issues of the debate:

> The communists believe that they have found the path to deliverance from our evils. According to them, man is wholly good and well-disposed to his neighbour; but the institution of private property has corrupted his nature. [...] If private property were abolished, all wealth held in common, and everyone allowed to share in the enjoyment of it, ill-will and hostility would disappear among men. [...] I have no concern with any economic criticism of the communist system; I cannot enquire into whether the abolition of private property is expedient or advantageous. But I am able to recognise that the psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion (Freud, 1929: 50).

I am not interested in reopening the debates between either historicism and existentialism or Marxism and psychoanalysis: these ought to be consigned to the historians of the philosophy of the 20th century; what I want to point out is their shared

philosophical framework and common analytical premise, reliant on the identification of modern civilisation with a system based on repression.

According to Freud, like any other system of civilisation, modern capitalism is founded on the necessary removal of the individual libido and on the sublimating organisation of the collective libido. This same intuition is inflected in various ways throughout the thought of the 20th century.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, this discontent is constitutive and insurmountable and the goal of psychoanalytical therapy is to cure, through language and anamnesis, the neuroses it produces in us. Existentialism-inspired philosophical culture shares Freud's belief in the insuperability of constitutive alienation and the repression of libidinal drives.

On the contrary, in Marxist and anti-authoritarian theory, repression is socially determined and can be removed by an act of society that frees the productive and desiring energies existing in its real movement.

Nonetheless, repression plays a crucial role in both philosophies because, as a concept, it serves as an explanation for the neurotic pathologies that psychological therapy takes as its object, as well as the capitalist social contradiction that revolutionary movements aim to abolish to create the conditions of possibility for the overcoming of exploitation and alienation itself.

During the 1960s and 1970s the concept of repression provided the backdrop to every political debate inspired by desire. The political value of desire was always pitted against dispositifs of repression, and these often revealed to be a conceptual and political trap. For

instance, following the 1977 wave of arrests of the February and March insurrections, the Italian movement decided to gather around the issue of repression at the Bologna conference. This could have been a conceptual mistake: in choosing repression as the main issue under discussion, we entered the narrative machine of power and lost the ability to imagine forms of life that were asymmetrical to and thus independent from it.

Anyhow, by the end of the 20th century the whole question of repression seemed to melt into thin air and disappear from the scene. Rather than neuroses produced by a repression of libido, the dominant pathologies of our times are schizoid and result from an eruption of expression: *'JUST DO IT'*.

Structure and desire

The anti-authoritarianism of the 1970s operated within a Freudian conceptual framework, though expanding and subverting its historical outlook. In *Eros and civilisation* Herbert Marcuse proclaims the actuality of the liberation of collective *Eros*. Repression constricts the potential of technology and knowledge and prevents their full development; yet critical subjectivity actually unfolds by enabling the full expression of the libidinal and productive potential of society, and creating the conditions for a full realisation of the pleasure principle. The analysis of modern society intersects the description of the mechanisms of discipline that repressively shape social institutions and public discourse. The recent publication of Michel Foucault's 1979 lectures (in particular, the lecture on 'The birth of biopolitics'[ii]) compels us to shift the barycentre of Foucault's thought away from repressive discipline and towards the creation of dispositifs of biopolitical control. However, Foucault still operates in his own way within the

'repressive' paradigm throughout his work on the genealogy of modernity (in particular, in *History of madness, The birth of the clinic,* and *Discipline and punish*).

Even Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, despite the openly declared abandonment of the Freudian framework in the *Anti-Oedipus*, operate within the field of problematisation outlined by Freud in 1929: desire is the motor of the movement that traverses both society and the path of singularity, whilst desiring creativity has to constantly come to terms with the repressive war machines wedged by capitalism into every fold of existence and imagination. The concept of desire cannot be flattened out by a reading of it in terms of 'repression'. In the *Anti-Oedipus* desire is opposed to lack. The philosophy of dialectics flourished and the politics of the 20th century built its (mis)fortunes on the notion of lack: a notion of dependency rather than autonomy. Lack is a product, determined by the regime of economics, religion and psychiatric domination.

Rather than lack, it is desire as creation that gives ground to processes of erotic and political subjectivation. In this respect, Deleuze and Guattari help our understanding of repression as nothing but a projection of desire: rather than the manifestation of a structure, desire is the possibility of creating thousands of structures. Desire can crystallise structures and turn them into obsessive refrains. Desire constructs traps to entrap desire.

Yet the analytical dispositif forged by Foucault's genealogy and Deleuze and Guattari's creationism predominantly views subjectivity as being capable of causing the desire that was removed to re-emerge in the face of repressive social sublimation; this is an anti-repressive, or, rather, expressive view.

The relationship between structure and desire is the key to the move of Guattari's schizoanalysis outside the orbit of Lacanian Freudianism. For Guattari, desire can be understood neither from the standpoint of structure, nor as a possible variant that depends on the invariance of the mathème; creative desire produces infinite structures, amongst which are also those functioning as dispositifs of repression.

The domain of semio-capital

If we want to leave the Freudian framework behind, we have to approach the position of Jean Baudrillard, whose contribution initially looked like a form of dissuasive thinking. Baudrillard draws a different scenario: in the early 1970s (in *The system of objects, The consumer society*, and *Forget Foucault*), he claims that the motor of capitalist development is desire, and the ideology of liberation corresponds to the full domination of the commodity: rather than repression, simulation and the proliferation of simulacra and seduction are the new framework of the imaginary. Baudrillard sees an excess of expressivity as the essential core of this overdose of reality.

> The real grows like a desert. Illusions, dreams, passions, madness, drugs, but also the artifice and the simulacrum, all used to be natural predators of reality. But they've all lost their energy, as if hit by an incurable and insidious disease (Baudrillard, 2006: 21).

Baudrillard anticipated a trend that was to become predominant in the following decades. His analysis shows how simulation transforms the subject-object relation forcing the subject into the subaltern position of being subjected to seduction. The agent is the

object rather than the subject, and the whole question of alienation, repression and the uneasiness they produce thus fades away.

In the much cited 'Postscript on control societies', which he wrote during the last years of his life, Deleuze appears to put under question the architecture deriving from Foucault's notion of discipline and to move in the direction of the Baudrillard of the early 1970s. Here, I am not interested in a comparison between a theory of simulacra and a theory of desire – which sooner or later deserves to be carried out – but in the scenario of psychopathologies that emerges as industrial society nears its end leaving way to semio-capitalism, namely, a capitalism founded on immaterial labour and the explosion of the info-sphere.

Overproduction is an inherent feature of capitalism because, rather than to the logic of the concrete needs of human beings, commodity production responds to the abstract logic of value production. However, the kind of overproduction manifest in semio-capitalism is specifically semiotic; an infinite excess of signs circulates in the info-sphere and saturates individual and collective attention.

Baudrillard's intuition proved to be crucial in the long run. The prevailing pathology of times to come is a product of the generalised compulsion to expression, rather than repression. The first video-electronic generation shows signs of the effects of pathologies of hyper-expression, not of repression.

When dealing with the suffering of our times and the discomfort of the first connective generation, we are no longer in the conceptual framework of Freud's *Civilisation and its discontents.* In Freudianism, at the basis of pathology lies concealment: something

is hidden from us, removed, and then disappears; we are prevented from something. Evidently, the basis of pathology today is no longer concealment but hyper-vision, an excess of visibility, the explosion
of the info-sphere and an overload of info-neural stimuli.

Not repression, but hyper-expressivity is the technological and anthropological domain of our understanding of the genesis of contemporary psychopathologies such as AHDD, dyslexia, and panic. These indicate a different way of processing informational input, whilst manifesting themselves as suffering, uneasiness and marginalisation. Though it might not be necessary, it is worth pointing out that my approach has nothing to do with reactionary and bigot preaching on the evils caused by so-called permissiveness or how good the repression of yesteryear was for our minds and customs.

Pathologies of expressivity

In their introduction to a book on contemporary forms of psychopathology, the editors of *Civiltà e disagio* [Civilisation and discomfort] state:

> Our purpose in this book is to rethink the binomial relationship between civilisation and discomfort in the light of the deep social transformations our lives have undergone. One of the most significant of these is a change of sign in the imperative of the social Super-Ego of our times. Whilst the Freudian imperative required a renunciation of instincts, the new social imperative thrusts us towards enjoyment. In fact, the symptoms of discomfort of contemporary civilisation are closely related

> to enjoyment; they are either real practices of it (drug related perversions, bulimia, obesity, and alcoholism), or manifestations of a narcissistic closure that produces stagnations of enjoyment in the body (anorexia, depression, and panic) (Cosenza, Recalcati, Villa, 2006).

Freud identified the dominant social psychopathology with neurosis, which he believed to be the effect of a process of removal; today this is psychosis, which is increasingly associated with the domain of excesses of energy and information, rather than with removal.

In his schizoanalytical works, Guattari concentrated on the possibility of reworking the whole field of psychoanalysis starting from a redefinition of the relationship between neurosis and psychosis, and from the central methodological and cognitive role of schizophrenia. The political effects of his redefinition were very powerful and coincided with the explosion of the neurotic limits imposed on expression by capitalism through the restriction of agency to the repressive boundaries of labour and the subjection of desire to a disciplinary removal; but the very schizo-morphous pressure of movements and the eruption of expression in the social lead to a metamorphosis (or a schizo-metamorphosis) of languages, forms of production and, lastly, capitalist exploitation.

The psychopathologies spreading to the everyday lives of the first generations of the age of connection cannot be comprehended within the repressive and disciplinary framework. Rather than pathologies of removal, they are pathologies of the '*just do it*':

> hence, the centrality of psychosis. Unlike clinical neurosis, which is symbolic because operative within the linguistic and rhetorical domain of removal and the

> normative foundations of Oedipus, psychosis is always a clinic of the real, not governed by symbolic castration, and thus closer to the truth of structure (it is structurally impossible to symbolise the real of enjoyment as a whole) (Recalcati, 2006: 4).
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> The dispersal of identity points to the absence of a centre for the identification that occurs in neurosis, which would enable the subject to structure a strong Ego within certain boundaries and become integrated in primary relations with objects and their identification (Recalcati, 2006: 22).

From the standpoint of semio-pathology, schizophrenia could be seen as an excess of semiotic flows with respect to the power of interpretation. As the universe starts moving too fast and too many signs are calling for our interpretation, the mind is no longer able to distinguish the lines and points that shape things. So we try to grasp meaning through a process of over-inclusion and an extension of the boundaries of signification. In the conclusion to their last joint work, Deleuze and Guattari write:

> We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. 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 others that we no longer master. These are infinite *variabilities*, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colourless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999: 201)

Semiotics of schizophrenia

A semiotic regime is repressive when one, and only one, signified is ascribed to each signifier. Whoever fails to interpret the signs of power in the right way, doesn't wave at the flag or respect their superiors, and breaks the law, is in trouble. However, the semiotic regime we find ourselves in as inhabitants of the semio-capitalist universe is characterised by an excess of speed of the signifiers and stimulates a sort of interpretative hyper-kinesis. The typical *over-inclusion* of schizophrenic interpretation becomes the predominant mode of navigation in the proliferating universe of video-electronic media.

In a chapter entitled 'Toward a theory of schizophrenia', Bateson defined schizophrenic interpretation thus:

> The schizophrenic shows weakness in three fields of the communicative function: a) a difficulty in ascribing the correct mode of communication to messages coming from other people; b) a difficulty in ascribing the correct mode of communication to verbal and non verbal messages; and c) a difficulty in ascribing the right mode of communication to her own thought, sensation and perception (Bateson, 1972: 240).

In the video-electronic info-sphere we all inhabit the conditions that describe schizophrenic communication. Exposed to an overloading of signifying impulses, the human receiver is unable to process the meaning of statements and stimuli in sequence and faces the difficulties listed by Bateson. A further peculiar character of the schizophrenic Bateson mentions is that she does not know how to distinguish metaphor from literary expression.

> The peculiarity of the schizophrenic is not that she uses metaphors, but that she uses them without identifying them (Bateson, 1972: 248).

In the domain of digital simulation, metaphors and things become less and less distinguishable; thing turns into metaphor and metaphor into thing, representation replaces life, and so too life representation. Semiotic flows and commodity circulation juxtapose their codes and become part of the same constellation, which Baudrillard calls hyper-reality. Thus the register of schizophrenia becomes the main mode of interpretation. The system of collective cognition loses its critical competence; this amounted to the ability to discern truth value in the statements that were submitted in sequences to relatively alert attention. Amidst the proliferation of fast media, interpretation no longer unfolds along sequential lines; instead, it follows associative spirals and a-signifying connections.

Interpretation and overload

In 'Learner based listening and technological authenticity', Richard Robin, a researcher from George Washington University, studies the effect of the acceleration of speech on listening comprehension. Robin's research is based on a calculation of the number of syllables spoken each second. A faster rate, and more syllables per second decrease the level of the listener's comprehension of meaning: the faster the flow of syllables per second, the less the time for the listener to critically process the message. The speed of emission and the amount of semiotic impulses sent in a given time unit are functional to the time available to a conscious processing.

> Fast speech intimidates listeners. Evidence suggests that globalisation has produced faster speech emission rates in areas of the world where the Western mode of transmission of signs has come to replace traditional and authoritarian ones. For instance, in the ex-Soviet Union the speed of transmission measured in syllables per second has almost doubled since the fall of the communist regime: from three to almost six syllables per second. ; similar findings reached the same conclusions in the Middle East and China' (Robin, 1991: 403).

The implications of Robin's study are extremely interesting for our understanding of the transition from a form of authoritarian biopolitical power that is persuasive (like the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century) to a form of biopolitical power that is pervasive (as the contemporary info-cracy).

Persuasive power is founded on consensus: citizens must understand the reasons of the President, General, Secretary or the Duce. Only one source of information is authorised. Dissident voices are subjected to censorship. Instead, the info-cratic regime of semio-capital grounds its power on overload, the acceleration of semiotic flows and the proliferation of sources of information, to the point of the producing the white noise of indistinctiveness, irrelevance and indecipherability.

20th century art was conceived as flows of desire and liberating expressions; Surrealism celebrated the expressive power of the subconscious as liberating social and psychic energies. Today, art is also the flow of therapy for mind ecology. Art has replaced the police in the universal dispositif of mind control, but at the same time it looks for inroads into therapy.

Whilst the prevailing epidemic pathology of modernity was the neurosis produced by repression, the pathologies spreading epidemically today manifest signs of psychosis and panic. A hyper-stimulation of attention reduces the ability to critically and sequentially interpret the speech of the other, who tries and yet fails to be understood.

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[i]Translator's note (TN): The title Freud initially chose for this essay was *Das Unglück der Kultur,* which he later changed into *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. Whilst *Unglück* can be translated as

'unhappiness', *Unbehagen* would best translate as 'uneasiness' or 'discomfort'. My German colleague, Irene, suggests that 'it means being uneasy, but conscious about one's discomfort and knowing its inescapability; sitting on the edge with arms and hands clasped to one's chest'. The term used by the author in Italian is 'disagio', which expresses a feeling of awkwardness rather than discontent. Given that 'discontent' clearly refers to lack of happiness, which is a notion absent both from the German and the Italian term, 'uneasiness' or 'discomfort' were used.

[ii] TN: The lectures on La naissance de la biopolitique were delivered at the Collège de France in 1978-79, and published in French in 2004 (Paris: Gallimard) and in Italian in 2005 (Milan: Feltrinelli). An introductory essay, to which the author is likely to be referring here, had been previously published in 1979 as 'Naissance de la biopolitique' in *Annuaire du collège de France, Histoire des systemes de pensee*, pp. 367-372, and in 1994 in *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, pp. 818-825 (Paris: Gallimard). In English, the essay was translated as 'The birth of biopolitics' and published in the *Essential works: ethics* 1954-1984, vol. I (London: Penguin) pp. 73-79. In April 2008, Palgrave Macmillan (London) will publish the English translation of the whole set of 1978-79 lectures as *The birth of biopolitics*.