03 2018

The Politics of Condividuality

Marco Deseriis

If the media have always been "social," it is no accident that they acquire this qualifier when their socialness becomes economically valuable. As if capital could recognize the social life of media only when it was finally able to quantify it—to make it speak, *in metrics*, its own language. Curiously, however, while the social media user is still subjectified qua individual, the algorithmic governance of social media breaks down each user's profile on the basis of discrete actions she performs vis-à-vis other users. These *dividual* electronic transactions, as Gilles Deleuze famously termed them, are the basic unit of informational capital, which recombines the data we leave behind in a potentially infinite variety of data sets.

The fact that digital capitalism mines and correlates our data raises the question of whether there exists a space for a politics that may also begin from the composition of dividuals to go *beyond* capitalism. In other words, is it possible to imagine a networked politics where the datum is the point of departure of a compositional process that exceeds algorithmic control? What would be the compositional logic of this kind of *con*dividuality?

From the Dividual to the Condividual

In order to grasp the status of the dividual in the age of networks, it is worth beginning from the basic observation that digital data do not exist apart from the algorithmic operations that produce them and reproduce them qua data. Ultimately, these operations express the logical states of a system, which are also describable as (binary) data. The impossibility of attributing an ontological primacy to data or algorithm—which only exist for one another—means that the digital world is always-already-divided, or, as Alexander Galloway puts it, "the digital is the capacity to divide things, and make distinctions between them" (2014: xxix).

In computer networks, this segmentation—or dividualization—is a precondition of the recombination of multiple data points in variable data sets. This means that the dividual is always open to interaction, always ready to be detached from and attached to other dividuals. Thus, as compared with the *individual*—which prides itself of its unique properties—the dividual has the advantage of being combinable with other divisible beings that share some properties with it.

Drawing from the Scholastic philosophy of Gilbert de Poitiers—who was the first to contrast the dividual to the individual by attributing the property of *similitudo* to the former and the property of *dissimilitudo* to the latter—Gerald Raunig notes in his book on the genealogy and philosophy of con/dividuality that "*dividuum* has one component or multiple components, which constitute it as divisible and concatenate it with other parts that are similar in their components: similarity, not sameness or identity, similarity concerning only some components" (2016: 67).

Gilbert also noted that similarity enables dividuals that share some components to "co-form" a *unum dividuum*. Using a Deleuzian lexicon, we could say that the unuum dividuum is an assemblage that is *singular in its multiplicity* insofar as its components are linked without being subordinated to a higher unity. From this angle, all assemblages are *con*dividual assemblages, that is, they are concatenations of parts that can always be detached from and attached to other assemblages.

Such a statement, however, is too general to reveal anything significant about the condividual mode of concatenation. In what follows of this article, I will contrast two different logics that undergird the (de)composition of condividuals: an informational logic that drives the analytics of financial transactions; and a transductive logic that drives a range of unpredictable, non-integrated practices.

The Condividual Derivative

The main defining feature of financial derivatives such as forwards, futures, options, and swaps is that, unlike stocks, these types of contract do not entail a transfer of ownership. Indeed, derivatives "represent an evolution in the nature of ownership" (Bryan and Rafferty 2006: 18) from the physical possession of an asset to the acquisition of a right to participate in the collective determination of its future price. "This is because the derivative is pricing and trading only attributes of the asset, not the asset itself" (Ibid., 52). Keeping in mind that the dividual is that which is combinable with other dividuals that share some properties with it, we can thus break down the *condividual logic of the derivative* in three operating principles:

1) The decoupling of the attribute from the asset/referent it was originally attached to;

2) The *binding* of present and future prices of assets and commodities through their mutual constitution;

3) The *blending* of attributes related to different types of asset and forms of capital (Bryan and Rafferty, 2006: 12).

Thus the first distinctive feature of the derivative is that it connects elements that were previously unrelated without altering their original nature—i.e., loans remain loans even when the probability that they may or may not be repaid is traded on a secondary market. Second, the derivative makes the future retroact on the present by converting unknown values into known values. In information theory this conversion is expressed as mutual information, which measures how much information two variables share, and thus how the determination of one variable reduces uncertainty about the other.

Third, information theory is also central to understanding how the derivative comes to perform a function of equivalence, which is similar but *not identical* to the money-form. Whereas Marx identified socially necessary labor-time as the ultimate source of value expressed through the money-form, the capacity of the derivative to function as a yardstick of equivalence is *built upon* the money-form. Now, since the value of a derivative is also expressed as money, the source of the social form of the derivative—that is, the source of its exchangeability—cannot be money itself. Otherwise the derivative would simply function as a currency converter, that is, as a means of exchange between known quantities. As we have seen, however, the derivative's chief function is to convert unknown values into known values, the immeasurable into the measurable.

From this angle, the only possible source of the derivative's equivalential function is *information*—understood here as a measure of uncertainty or entropy (Shannon 1948). It follows that the derivative is both an informational commodity and an informational unit of measurement and exchange.

The recognition that the value of capital is socially constructed (rather than a reflection of economic fundamentals) is what allows Randy Martin (2015) to think the social logic of the derivative outside of the framework of political economy. What Martin and others do not emphasize enough, however, is that this logic is *algorithmically produced* on the basis of probability distributions that set the boundaries of what is socially knowable. Claude Shannon, the father of information theory, was the first to observe that all natural languages embed certain sequences of letters whose redundancy can be used to predict the letters that follow (Shannon 1951). Similarly, the risk management algorithms that undergird the world of derivatives and of

finance encode preexisting sequences of events as attributes (or risk scores) so as to measure the likelihood of their recurrence.

Thus the *cum-* of the *con*dividual derivative—what binds and blends its attributes—is information.

Information Theory and Its Limits

The mathematical and cybernetic definitions of information, however, provide us with only one possible understanding of how dividuals may concatenate. It has been noted in fact that Shannon's model reduces information to a "probability function with no dimensions, no materiality, and no necessary connection with meaning" (Hayles 1999: 18). In particular, the lack of a relationship between information and context—a relationship without which signification cannot exist—produces a mode of concatenation that is flat and uniplanar.

Indeed, in what Franco Berardi has termed the "connective mode of concatenation" the dividual elements of an assemblage "remain distinct and interact only functionally," that is, they do not undergo any transformation in the process of being algorithmically connected. In contrast, in what Berardi calls the conjunctive mode of concatenation, the elements (for example, the bodies of two lovers) do not follow any predetermined pattern or embedded program, giving rise to conjunctive syntheses that are unrepeatable and unique in the time-space continuum.

To be sure, as Berardi points out, the connective and the conjunctive are not mutually exclusive, but often coexist within the same body:

> There is always some connective sensibility in a conjunctive body, and there is always some conjunctive sensibility in a human body formatted in connective conditions. It's a problem of gradients, shades, undertones, not a problem of anthitetical opposition between poles (Berardi 2015: 16).

By separating the rules from context, and treating the latter as background noise, information theory foregrounds the connective dimension, framing the conjunctive as that which generates information only insofar as it deviates from probabilistic patterns based on what is already known. In order to conceive a concatenation of dividual parts that does not bracket context and signification we will have therefore to look for a different notion of information. Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation embeds a qualitative conception of information that in valorizing difference and "disparation" will allow us to grasp how dividuals are themselves capable of generating information through the very process of co-forming a *unuum dividuum*.

The Interior Dimension of Information

Simondon's philosophical project rests upon the notion that the living individual is never a finished entity but a system that keeps individuating through the course of its life:

> There is, in the living, *an individuation by the individual* and not only a functioning that would be the result of an individuation completed once and for all... the living resolves problems, not only by adapting itself, that is to say by modifying its relation to the environment (which a machine can do), but by modifying itself, by inventing new internal structures and by completely introducing itself into the axiomatic of vital problems. *The living individual is a system of individuation, an individuating system and a system individuating itself* (2009: 7).

Thus living beings are not just mechanically responding to environmental stimuli. Whereas information theory and cybernetics are exclusively interested in the measurable and recursive aspects of information, Simondon adds the critical insight that the individual, as an individuating system, constantly mediates between her associated milieu and "preindividual nature," understood as a zone of indetermination, filled with potentials, which expresses the reality of her becoming.

This mediation proceeds by leaps and bounds. If Simondon's ontogenesis postulates that Being is permanently becoming, a concrete being individuates itself through a *transduction*--"a physical, biological, mental, social" operation that progressively structures a domain in a state of metastable equilibrium (ibid., 11). Because a metastable system harbors a certain amount of potential energy, its equilibrium is only apparent. Indeed, a change in one of the system's parameters can set in motion a transduction that actualizes or temporalizes the system according to certain structures. As Deleuze notes in a review of Simondon's work, a metastable system is defined by "the existence of a 'disparation,' the existence of at least two different dimensions, two disparate levels of reality, between which there is not yet any interactive communication" (Deleuze 2004: 87).

The transductive operation is nothing but the establishment of this connection, this interactive communication between the dimensions of the domain that now emerge as correlated and in tension with one another. Simondon's primary example of a transductive operation is the process of crystallization. It begins when a supersaturated solution, rich in potential, meets a catalyzing agent that functions as a seed of crystallization, allowing the system to *dephase* and develop the dimensions through which it becomes progressively structured. Importantly, Simondon notes that only a seed that resonates with the metastability of the crystalline solution can kick off the crystallization process. This means that the crystalline seed and the crystalline solution must be compatible. And this compatibility, which is not based on identity but on difference and disparation, is precisely what Simondon calls *information* (Simondon 1964).

As noted, Simondon does not see the transductive operation as something that insists only upon the realm of physics and inorganic matter, but as an operation that undergirds all individuation, including the individuation of living beings and the concretization of technical objects. Further, a transduction can structure social and technical systems with one another, allowing for the actualization of sociotechnical domains that would otherwise exist only *in potentia*. A socio-technical transduction, however, cannot proceed from the simple *usage* of technical systems, but only from technical invention and technical activity:

> The technical activity distinguishes itself from mere work, and from alienating work, in that technical activity comprises not only the use of the machine, but also a certain coefficient of attention to the technical functioning, maintenance, adjustment, and improvement of the machine, which continues the activity of invention and construction (2017: 255).

Thus it is by paying attention "to the continued genesis of the technical object" that humans develop an inventive and non-alienated relationship with technology. Simondon argues that this inventive relation is *transindividual* in that it allows individuals to relate to one another via technical intermediaries that contain the preindividual. Whereas interindividuality denotes an exterior relation among individuals (such as the one that is given in work), the transindividual relation recognizes that the technical object "carries with it something of the being that has produced it" (253) as well as of its own ontogenesis (255).

It is only when humans recognize that the technical object is *itself a carrier of information*, and not just a utensil, that they begin to relate to each other as *subjects*, that is, as beings that contain the preindividual. In this way, Simondon provides us with a definition of information that in going beyond probabilistic measurement accounts for the interior dimension of relationality.

Transindividuality and Condividuality

It is worth noting that the transindividual relation does not pertain only to technical invention and technical activity but it is present in all forms of knowledge, affectivity and spiritual life that express "the systematic unity of the interior (psychic) individuation and the exterior (collective) individuation" (Simondon 2009: 8).

From this angle, the process of subjectivation coincides for Simondon with an individual's capacity to activate her charges of preindividual reality as she shares her problematic with other beings. Indeed because all individuals harbor the preindividual, they are already "group individuals" [*individus de groupe*] as they enter the collective (Simondon 1989: 184-186). Transindividuation is nothing but a transversal concatenation or a transductive concatenation whereby group individuals activate their possible other individuations in the process of relating to others.

For this psycho-social transduction to occur, however, the individual cannot relate to others as a constituted individual, that is, through the preconstituted roles and functional interactions typical of the interindividual relation. In fact, as Combes puts it, "the interindividual relationship even constitutes an obstacle" to the transindividual relation:

> Still, for the subject to become engaged in the constitution of the collective, first of all, means stripping away community, or at the very least, setting aside those aspects of community that prevent the perception of the existence of the pre-individual, and thus the encounter with the transindividual: identities, functions, the entire network of human 'commerce'—of which the principal currency of exchange . . . is language . . . which assigns each person to their place within social space (Combes 2013: 38).

It is through this path that we can return to our initial observation that informational capitalism interpellates the subject as a signifying entity (the social media user, the investor, the news reader) to then extract value from the recombination of her dividual transactions in a potentially infinite variety of data sets. These condividual assemblages go beyond the subject and the community in that their production is algorithmically managed, without the active involvement or knowledge of the humans who generate the data. In this sense, the condividuality of metadata and financial derivatives could be seen as going beyond the constituted identities and social roles typical of interindividuality.

Simondon's notion of the transindividual, however, implies a *disindividuating effort* on the side of the subject. Such effort "necessarily takes the form of a momentary loosening of the hold of constituted individuality, which is engulfed by the preindividual"—a temporary disindividuation that is "the condition of a new individuation" (ibid.). To illustrate how this temporary disindividuation that sets in motion a tranducstive process of condividuation may take place I will now turn to the case of the hacktivist network Anonymous.

Anonymous as Transductive Condividuality

As is known, the name Anonymous originally designated the tag that marks the unsigned comments in the imageboard 4chan, a discussion forum whose users are required to begin a conversation by posting an image. A discussion thread on 4chan appears then as a conversation made of several dividual contributions tagged Anonymous.

Around 2005, a flamewar erupted in the board between those who insisted on using personal identifiers to identify their posts and those who argued for complete anonymity as a more egalitarian mode of communicating—egalitarian because detached from the pseudonymous reputation economy of online discussion forums. Once Anonymous emerged as a collective assemblage of enunciation ("*We* Are Anonymous") it further individuated between those who inscribed its actions within an ethical and political horizon and those who refused any moral justification for them.

Thus, on a rhetorical and discursive level, the name Anonymous functions as a symbolic framework within which a series of agonistic challenges are launched over the mode of disposition and use of the alias. Far from weakening Anonymous, these internal challenges and confrontations have actually been the positive condition of its evolution. This is because Anonymous functions as a threshold that marks the passage from anonymity as an undifferentiated condition to Anonymity as ethical access to an experience that can be named as such.

To be sure, this capacity to transduce anonymity and Anonimity, amoral behaviors and ethico-political commitments, idiosyncratic and collective usages of an alias, is by no means exclusive to Anonymous. Anonymous is in fact part of a long lineage of shared pseudonyms—including Ned Ludd, Monty Cantsin, Karen Eliot and Luther Blissett, among others—that perform the function of bringing a variety of previously unconnected practices within the same discursive space (Deseriis 2015).

And yet the transductive capacities of Anonymous do not insist only on a rhetorical level, but fully invest the technological layer. Since its inception, Anonymous has experimented with information systems (imageboards, IRC networks, Piratepads, botnets) whose chief quality is openness and adaptability to a variety of uses. In Simondonian terms, these technologies have a high degree of technicity, that is, they embed a "certain margin of indeterminacy" that makes them "sensitive to outside information" (Simondon 2017: 17). More than any specialization or automation, it is this margin of indetermination that allows such technologies to evolve in time while preserving their preindividual reality, that is, a socio-technical memory of their prior individuations.

If this is true of all free and open source software—whose development culture perfectly embodies the transindividual relation—Anonymous transduces this technical culture with a series of campaigns or "operations" against governments and corporations that restrict access to information and information technology. In Simondonian terms these campaigns and operations are not an extension of an already individuated collective of enunciation but *constitute* the assemblage Anonymous *through* its antagonistic relationship to the proprietary control of information—be it in the form of the state secret or intellectual property.

From this angle, Anonymous does not identify a political problem, a power structure, an injustice, to *subsequently* find an adequate technical solution to organize a resistance. Rather, Anonymous has identified the margin of indetermination of technical objects and living beings alike as its ontological ground and terrain of struggle. In this politics of rhetorical and technological transduction that is productive of information lies the radical alterity of Anonymous to the predictive analytics of financial capitalism and big data.

Two Types of Condividuality

The two examples of condividuality provided in this article—the condividual derivative and the condividual assemblage of enunciation known as Anonymous—share one feature. They are both concatenations of dividuals whose composition expresses a "being-in-common that is not a common being" (Nancy 1991: 62). The attributes may be compatible, but their compatibility is not enough to produce a common identity, to make a community.

There is, however, a fundamental difference in the *cum* of these condividuals, which can be explained with the two different definitions of information discussed above. The cum of the derivative is connective, flat, asignifying, probabilistic and oriented towards prediction. The cum of the shared pseudonym is conjunctive, deep, transductive, and internally open to the indetermination of the assemblage through which it is constituted as more than one.

In other words, whereas the *informational condividual* is predicated *upon* the capacity of the digital "to divide things and make distinctions between them" (Galloway 2014), the *transductive condividual* emerges *through* the conjunction of socio-technical parts that generate information in the becoming-real of their relationality.

If this is true, then our task is to understand how transductive condividuality can generate a type of information that transforms the known into the unknown, the dividual datum into a component of a set of incommensurable practices. Thus, while the economics of condividuality reduces indeterminacy to the possible and the probable, the politics of condividuality sets the indeterminate in motion through the mutual constitution of parts that resonate with one another. This is true, for example, of the (post-)2011 social movements, which transduced class, gender, racial, and sexual differences in a highly inclusive set of socio-symbolic practices (the indignation, the 99%, the protest camp) resonating and propagating in a wide range of sociopolitical milieus.

Perhaps then, instead of relying on Gilbert's principle of *similarity*, the Simondonian notions of resonance, transduction and *compatibility* are more adequate to grasp the compositional logic of these condividual assemblages. Not to be confused with the complementarity of individuated parts, compatibility expresses the capacity of dividuals to express their difference *in* the very process of interacting with one another. To be sure, this is possible only insofar as the partiality of the dividual is not a known quantity—as is the case of the informationalized, financialized dividual. In other words, the dividual that is produced by a probability function has been rendered similar to the dividuals with which it is correlated. The dividual that emerges within a metastable system is instead compatible with the dividuals with which it resonates. The former may mold and anticipate the future, but as every attribute it has no knowledge of itself. The latter knows nothing about the future, but as every part it carries the knowledge that makes it other than it is.

References

Berardi, F. (2015) *AND: Phenomenology of the End*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bryan, D. and Rafferty, M. (2006) *Capitalism with Derivatives: A Political Economy of Financial Derivatives, Capital and Class*. London: Palgrave.

Combes, M. (2013) *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (trans. T. LaMarre), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Deleuze, G. (2004) On Gilbert Simondon. In *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1954-72* (trans. M. Taormina). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). 86-89.

Deseriis, M. (2015) *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Galloway, A. R. (2014) *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hayles, K. (1999) *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Martin, R. (2015) *Knowledge LTD: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative. Philadelphia: Temple University Press*.

Nancy, J-L. (1991) *The Inoperative Community* (trans. P. Connor et al.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Raunig, G. (2016) *Dividuum. Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution, Volume 1* (trans. Aileen Derieg). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press.

Shannon, C. E. (1948) A Mathematical Theory of Communication. *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27(3): 379-423.

Shannon, C. E. (1951) Prediction and Entropy of Printed English. *The Bell System Technical Journal* 30(1): 50-64.

Simondon, G. (1964) *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique (L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information)*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Simondon, G. (1989) *L'individuation psychique et collective*. Paris: Aubier.

Simondon, G. (2009) The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis. *Parrhesia* 7: 4-16.

Simondon, G. (2017) *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (trans. C. Malaspina and J. Rogove). Minneapolis: Univocal.