

Belief and its Discontents
Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals

Bernard Stiegler (translated by Daniel Ross)
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In *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Bernard Stiegler describes what he clearly considers the dark side to the rise of what English Departments in the United States call 'literary theory': "It was in fact standard procedure, in the course of the dark 1970s, to *disappoint*, and to claim a *disappointing heuristic* in the name of the struggle against 'received ideas' and 'ideologies.'" After ideology lost its power as a positive philosophical concept, in the wake of Freud and Nietzsche, and against Althusser and certain aspects of Foucault, Stiegler continues: "It became simply fashionable to reveal to the naïve world that all these beautiful discourses (on teaching methods, for example) are in fact doing service to a disciplinary State apparatus, and that the teacher who believes she is a teacher is actually a prison guard."¹ What he addresses in *Taking Care* as a matter of fostering inter-generational relations (which is to say, education), Stiegler previously addressed in the second volume of *Disbelief and Discredit, Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals*, as a question of belief.

Such is the challenge Bernard Stiegler presents to us in *Uncontrollable Societies*, his most recently translated volume: he *believes*. And he challenges us to believe with him—in education, in humanity, in society, in symbols, in spirit, in the future. In the following passage, Stiegler responds to Nicholas Sarkozy's claim regarding people's difficulty in finding meaning in their existences:

We know the meaning of this existence is life after death: spirit. But does the question of spirit and religion, and what links spirit to religion, in fact amount to the question of what *exceeds* death as *a life beyond*? Or is it not a completely different question, a *more interesting and complex* question—the question, precisely, of psychic individuation insofar as it is always already collective, that is: insofar as is what will continue beyond *my* death, from the instant of my death, and as the future of my children, or the children of my family and my friends, of the *we* that humanity constitutes, as the *we* that is essentially *the unity of care for our dependents or or the descendants of those close to us, and, step by step, for all our fellow human beings*, so that we do not hold that attitude expressed colloquially as "*after me, the deluge*"?²

1 Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (trans. Stephen Barker), Stanford: Stanford University Press (2010), 119 (original emphasis).

2 Bernard Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals* (trans. Daniel Ross), Cambridge and Malden:

Sarkozy distinguishes—in a manner reminiscent of the secular humanism of the Enlightenment deplored by the religious right in the United States, of which Sarkozy is a sort of European counterpart—between the role of religion (care of eternal life) and that of government (care of temporal life).³ The problem, as Stiegler's two questions imply, derives from Sarkozy's understanding, in the manner of cynical politicians in whom we cannot believe, but only 'trust' (which involves concerns that are short-term and merely individual, rather than ones that are longterm and collective), of the absolute distinction between religion and government, between the eternal and the temporal. In this distinction, Sarkozy posits an afterlife for the 'I' who continues her life in the beyond without regard for the 'we' she leaves behind. Elsewhere, Stiegler refers to this lack of care as 'I-don't-give-a-fuckism' (*je-m'en-foutisme*).

Contra this attitude, Stiegler asserts the necessity of thinking the 'I' as always part of a 'we', of thinking the relation between the One and the Many, “the first and perhaps the only question of philosophy.”⁴ Beyond the death of any individual, in a future of which the individual will not and cannot be a part, will exist a society, even if this society is by definition (insofar as it is a future society) unknowable. To accept this society of the future is to believe in it, to understand its consistence as a symbol. For Stiegler, there are three forms or conditions of 'being': subsistence, existence, and consistence. That which subsists (and therefore does not exist), such as animal life, merely is and leads a life without *reason*. That which consists (and therefore does not exist), leads a 'life' in which being and reason are one, even if the relation between the two remains incalculable (and therefore beyond the scope of political economy). That which exists seeks to avoid mere being by pursuing the incalculable consistency of its being and its reason, at which it will never arrive. Such human being becomes, or individuates in a term Stiegler borrows from Gilbert Simondon, toward a consistence that only manifests on another plane (and Stiegler here draws from Deleuze and Guattari, who write of planes of consistency on which assemblages manifest by finding a proper level of abstraction). In order for the existent to pursue its consistence—and avoid the disindividuation, desublimation, and/or disaffection that lead to subsistence—it must have a reason, something in which to believe: a symbol, something that possesses consistence, something whose meaning is at one with its being. In this manner, as well as in a more conventional sense, Stiegler claims that such symbols do not exist.

Such symbols take many forms: the future, God, the nation. However, when

Polity (2013), 109 (original emphasis).

3 In the first volume of *Disbelief and Discredit, The Decadence of Industrial Democracies* (trans. Daniel Ross, Stanford: Polity, 2011), Stiegler identifies a contemporary European crisis that has resulted from the European adoption of numerous aspects of American industrial capitalism. While Sarkozy—who at the time Stiegler wrote *Uncontrollable Societies* had not yet been elected to the presidency, but instead was serving as Minister of the Interior, a post that includes Minister of Religion (see translator's note to page 107)—cannot be reduced to a North American cause, he is nonetheless involved in this adoption.

4 Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies*, 122.

Stiegler notes that “[o]bjects of belief do not exist and this is why they are not calculable,” we begin to see the problem.⁵ Politicians such as Sarkozy, again cynical by definition, separate the question of belief from that of politics—separate the eternal from the temporal as that which does not concern itself with earthly life—and thereby destroy consistence. In so doing, politicians destroy the trust they demand (insofar as they have previously reduced belief to trust, the longterm to the short-term). They seek to calculate, to give an absolute value to, the relationship between the eternal and the temporal as a transaction between the individual and her god. They turn symbols into 'diaboles', malevolent constructions of opposing tendencies robbed of their intimate involvement with one another, and engender therefore 'symbolic misery' (an immiseration, a poverty). With nothing left to believe in, with nothing toward which to progress or individuate, the I no longer finds home within a we: “No society is possible without belief, that is, without motivation, or in other words without reason.”⁶ In an overturning of the Enlightenment thought that underpins critiques of modernity by Adorno and Agamben, Stiegler argues that such a society, bereft of belief, becomes irrational; belief, which can never be reduced to the calculation of a professional politician, is part and parcel of rationality, a form of rationality which extends beyond mere *ratio*.

Here we see the potential power of Stiegler’s thought, namely that it demands we reject cynicism, including that cynicism many academics learned at the feet of those from whom Stiegler himself descends, the cynicism that says school is only a prison, that eternity is only that which robs the temporal of its meaning. Contra Camus’ Merseault, who rejects the priest’s offer of salvation and a meaningful life granted by that which is beyond life, Stiegler insists on the necessity of belief for earthly society and its politics. While this review cannot do justice to the complexities of Stiegler’s thought in *Uncontrollable Societies* and the many texts with which it engages (Stiegler’s own as well as those of Freud, Nietzsche, Marcuse, Deleuze, and others), let me be clear this thought does not invoke belief innocently or naïvely. That which consists will never exist, and society must never finally settle in its belief on a final, immutable symbol. Society must ever critique itself, in what Stiegler calls the Kantian sense: the critique of that which is necessary.

Here, however, those of us trained to *disappoint* (in the double sense of demonstrating failure and removing something from its position) find something distasteful in Stiegler’s approach (and I use the term 'distasteful' knowingly, in relation to Stiegler’s claim about the 'fashionableness' of such disappointment—perhaps all of these concerns are a matter of taste, which is to say an uncritical belief). We might ask, for example, “Whose critique?” When Stiegler writes, “Authority is the condition of all consistence: it designates consistence in general; it is the general structure through which consistences are possible,” we might ask, “Whose authority?”⁷ When Stiegler states

5 Ibid., 66.

6 Ibid., 67.

7 Ibid., 45.

his idealism, even with nuanced conceptions of “idealization” and “ideality,” we might wonder if he considers himself a philosopher king. He has promised a fourth volume of *Disbelief and Discredit: The Aristocracy to Come* (the third, *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism* appeared with *Uncontrollable Societies* and is forthcoming in translation from Polity), in which he plans to rehabilitate the concept of 'aristocracy', or government by the best. We might ask, “Who or what is the best? Who gets to decide?”

To be clear, Stiegler answers all of these questions. He insists on the capacity of the individual to judge, to interpret, to critique, and on the necessity of universal education (which is not merely prison) to foster such abilities. With Antigone (a major figure in *Uncontrollable Societies*), he rejects 'authority without credit', or that authority which does not allow for consistences. He likewise rejects the purported stability of the Idea in favor of a metastability, a temporary consistence that must always be subject to critique. No doubt his understanding of 'aristocracy' involves his conceptualization of the involvement of the best with the worst, a recognition of the pharmacological nature of such a government.

The question, therefore is not whether Stiegler can answer these questions. Again, he has. The question is whether we can believe his answers, whether we have become so disaffected as to be incapable of subjecting our own thought to a critique that might expose our cynicism as such.

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