BERNARD STIEGLER

dates

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East Coast

Biography

Bernard Stiegler is a philosopher and the Director of the Georges Pompidou Institute of Research and Innovation, created to anticipate changes in cultural resources and consumption brought about by new technologies. His probingly critical books, including What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology (Polity Press, April 2013), reflect on the effects these technologies and capitalism have on our daily lives and spirits, and sound a call to arms against some of their more pernicious effects.

Stiegler studied under the direction of Jacques Derrida at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, where he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy in 1993. Since then, he has directed research at the Collège international de philosophie and the University of Technology of Compiègne, and held the posts of deputy director of the Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA) and director of the Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique (Ircam).

In 2005, Stiegler founded the cultural and philosophical association Ars Industrialis, which he continues to direct. Through various publications as well as its internet activity, this association offers critical reflection on the "technologies de l'esprit" (in particular, telecommunications and computer technology) and examines the underlying economic realities in these fields, calling for a new "life of the mind." He is also an associate professor at Goldsmith College in London and the Université de technologie de Compiègne.

selected bibliography

In English

• For a New Critique of Political Economy, Polity, 2010
• Taking Care of Youth and the Generations, Stanford University Press, 2010
• Acting Out, Stanford University Press, 2008

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About the book

Max Weber argued that the development of capitalism would lead to the progressive unrationalization and disenchantment of society: today this process is reaching its endpoint and capitalism is collapsing into a disturbing kind of irrationality. It engenders spiritual misery - a paralysis of the function of the human mind or spirit - where reason disappears as a motive of hope, a ‘kingdom of ends’ in Kant’s sense. Absolute disenchantment afflicts all those who no longer have anything to expect from the development of hyper-industrial society. Those who are desperate become ‘desperados’, and they are becoming more and more numerous.

No longer having anything to expect means, at the same time, no longer having anything to fear. And the proliferating repressive mechanisms that are supposed to cope with the effects of this loss of authority turn out to be less and less effective. For such measures engender more and more the opposite of that for which they were intended, but in extreme and totally irrational, unpredictable forms.

This is where we are today: the technical system of the hyper-industrial epoch can maintain its power only so long as it is backed up by blind trust, but this trust is undermined by the destructive irrationality stemming from the liquidation of the kingdom of ends. From the moment this trust is lost, hyper-power is inverted into...
hyper-vulnerability and impotence. The loss of motives of hope then expands, encompassing all of us like a contagious illness. But this 'all' is no longer a 'we': it is a panic.

The Re-Enchantment of the World: The Value of the Human Spirit vs Industrial Populism
Translated by Arthur Trevor
(Continuum; 1 edition, 2012)

Bernard Stiegler's work on the intimate relations between the human and the technical have made him one of the most important voices to have emerged in French philosophy in the last decade. At the same time both an accessible summation of that work and a continuation of it, The Re-Enchantment of the World advances a critique of consumer capitalism that draws on Freud and Marx to construct an utterly contemporary analysis of our time. The book explores the cognitive, affective, social and economic effects of the 'proletarianization' of the consumer in late capitalism and the resulting destruction of the consumer's savoir-vivre. Reflecting the collective work of his activist organisation, Ars Industrialis, Stiegler here sets forth an alternative path to that of 'industrial populism', one that appeals to the force of the human spirit. The Re-Enchantment of the World also includes the manifesto of Ars Industrialis and an account of the organisation's 2005 summit in Tunis.

Decadence of Industrial Democracies
Translated by Daniel Ross
Polity, 2011

Bernard Stiegler is one of the most original philosophers writing today about new technologies and their implications for social, political and personal life. Drawing on sources ranging from Plato and Marx to Freud, Heidegger and Derrida, he develops a highly original account of technology as grammatology, as a technics of writing that constitutes our experience of time, memory and desire, even of life itself. Society and our place within it are shaped by technical reproduction which can both expand and restrict the horizons and possibilities of human agency and experience.

In the three volumes of Disbelief and Discredit Stiegler argues that this process of technical reproduction has become dangerously divorced from its role in the constitution of human experience. Radically challenging the optimistic view of new technologies as facilitators of learning and progress, he argues new marketing techniques shortcircuit thought and disenfranchise consumers, programming them to seek short-term gratification. These practices of 'libidinal economics' have profound consequences for nature of human desire and they underpin the social and psychological malaise of contemporary industrial society.

In this opening volume Stiegler argues that the industrial model implemented since the beginning of the twentieth century has become obsolete, leading capitalist democracies to an impasse. A sign of this impasse and of the decadence to which it leads is the banalization of consumers who become ensnared in a perpetual cycle of consumption. This is the new proletarianization of the technologically infused, hyper-industrial capitalism of today. It produces a society cut off from its past and its future, stultifying human development and turning democracy into a farce in which disbelief and discredit inevitably arise.
The catastrophic economic, social and political crisis of our time calls for a new and original critique of political economy - a rethinking of Marx's project in the very different conditions of twenty-first century capitalism.

Stiegler argues that today the proletarian must be reconceptualized as the economic agent whose knowledge and memory are confiscated by machines. This new sense of the term 'proletarian' is best understood by reference to Plato's critique of exteriorized memory. By bringing together Plato and Marx, Stiegler can show how a generalized proletarianization now encompasses not only the muscular system, as Marx saw it, but also the nervous system of the so-called creative workers in the information industries. The proletarians of the former are deprived of their practical know-how, whereas the latter are shorn of their theoretical practice, and both suffer from a confiscation of the very possibility of a genuine art of living.

But the mechanisms at work in this new and accentuated form of proletarianization are the very mechanisms that may spur a reversal of the process. Such a reversal would imply a crucial distinction between one's life work, originating in otium (leisure devoted to the techniques of the self), and the job, consisting in a negotium (the negotiation and calculation, increasingly restricted to short-term expectations), leading to the necessity of a new conception of economic value.

This short text offers an excellent introduction to Stiegler's work while at the same time representing a political call to arms in the face of a deepening economic and social crisis.

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