

Against Simplification: The Intermittence of Life

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Just prior to his own suicide in November 1995, the last work published by Gilles Deleuze was an all-too-brief excursus, 'Immanence: A Life', on the singularity of vital processes that always escape the confinement of life to the seeming 'transcendence' and 'determination' of individual organs and organisms.¹⁵⁷ At the heart of the essay is an image, taken from Dickens, of beatitude creeping across the lips of a dying wretch, an impersonal, incalculable and excessive force of libidinal possibility that seeps through and triumphs over the apparent entrapment of death. Bernard Stiegler did not quite share Deleuze's commitment to what he saw as the (mere) affirmation of an always-already there vitality of life, understood as revolutionary (but virtual and habitually castrated) desiring-production.¹⁵⁸ He saw both life and desire as fragile and in need of careful cultivation to stave off collapse.¹⁵⁹ He also thought true vitality, at least in the case of exosomatic, 'noetic' animals, occurs only when we use technical objects to shape the world around us and internalise the experience of this work in the form of new knowledge and *savoir-vivre*. The same technologies can simultaneously take hold of, proletarianise and exhaust us, forcing us to adapt to their imperatives without affording us any role in their creation of ourselves and our environments. Technics thus serves as the condition of possibility and impossibility of both desire and *la vie de l'esprit*. Noetic vitality is moreover fleeting at best, glimpsed in exceptions to the general tendency of regression towards entropy, or the dissipation of energy available for work into unharnessable violence and emotional exhaustion. We '*inhuman* beings' become *not-inhuman*, leaping onto Deleuze's plane of consistency '*only intermittently*', which is to say, only when we use our tools to create a quasi-causal agency that wrests us out of unthinking and unproductive habits, before readjusting our behaviours around new habits that will, in time, become equally unthought.¹⁶⁰

But as we see right up until his final written text, '*Démesure, promesses, compromis*', delivered to Mediapart just before his death in August 2020 and published exactly a month later, Stiegler shares Deleuze's interest in the incalculable – which is to say, in the irreducibility of life to calculations of productivity outputs. He rejects quantificatory attempts to determine the future with such certainty that it effectively disappears, self-defeatingly truncated by the refusal to countenance the unpredictability, the spiraling unintended consequences, of our longer-term Anthropocenic horizons. The obsession with accumulating (big) data to make us visible and facilitate predictive certainty becomes the 'regime of truth' through which 'humanity self-destructs'.¹⁶¹ This is, on one hand, because of the way that science is rendered complicit in the elimination of intermittence, automating bodies for the purpose of often

mindless work, and in so doing transforming noetic life into the manipulable substrate of what Jason W. Moore calls ‘Cheap Nature’. The cooptation of science by capitalism reaches its apogee in computational capitalism, on one hand via the threat of replacing us with robots, which pushes us to adapt to long hours of precarious, habitually mindless, production; on the other, through the algorithms that regress us to the automated behaviours of compulsive consumption, while simultaneously coaxing us to surrender what little remains of leisure time to the performance of unpaid labour for the very search engines and social media companies whose services we addictively consume. Like Jason Moore, Stiegler locates the root of this sacrifice of intermittence to expectations of ceaseless productivity in Cartesian rationalism: not just in the ego that declines to recognise its own intermittence, by believing itself permanent and not just coincidental, with the assertion of ‘*cogito ergo sum*’, but moreover in the mindset that treats the *res extensa* of nature as subordinate to the transformations of reason.¹⁶² We can, however, trace the trajectory of this culture of calculation much further back – and, in so doing, ultimately reinforce Stiegler’s argument over not only the intermittence of life, but also of a ‘primordial diversity’ of ways of living that have since been homogenised out of existence.¹⁶³ This move will take us back to the start of the Holocene and the first great organological revolution, when the settlement of agriculture made for an unprecedented acceleration in the cumulative human culture that Stiegler conceives in terms of tertiary memory.

For what – to play on the opening question of Deleuze’s final essay – is a cultivated field, if not the condition of both the possibility and impossibility of the kind of life of the mind that Bernard Stiegler terms ‘*noēsis*’? The answer is less straightforward than often assumed. Anthropologists including Jared Diamond have argued that the earliest moves in the history of agriculture and domestication created a basis for social stability and forward planning, which in turn freed up leisure time, enabling a part of the population to devote itself to thought, art and government. Neolithic technologies like blades, baskets, pestles, ovens and waterproof containers for the harvesting, grinding, roasting and storage of seeds, in this respect, are seen to have paved the way for a life of intermittence, spared from the all-encompassing labours of food production – at least for some.¹⁶⁴ The alternative reading, tied to the structural impossibility of permanent *noēsis*, is that Pleistocenic life was already intermittent; that this intermittence was destroyed by the use of agriculture to justify a splitting of populations into a disautomated, privileged class of thinkers who (mis)took their leisure as a permanent condition, and an underclass of exhausted, disease-ridden workers, forced into a life of subsistent servitude. The question faced by elites was the same then as they face now, in the context of a pandemic caused, in no small part, by the exhaustions of a burned-out society, and further beset by a critical loss of confidence in the very science that might just save us. For how long can we stave off the unintended consequences of this separation?

1. The Original Intermittent Society

Rather than heralding a new era of easy living, the Agricultural Revolution left farmers with lives generally more difficult and less satisfying than those of foragers. Hunter-gatherers spent their

time in more stimulating and varied ways, and were less in danger of starvation and disease. The Agricultural Revolution certainly enlarged the sum total of food at the disposal of humankind, but the extra food did not translate into a better diet or more leisure. Rather, it translated into population explosions and pampered elites, the average farmer worked harder than the average forager, and got a worse diet in return. The Agricultural Revolution was history's biggest fraud.¹⁶⁵

Perhaps the central contention of Yuval Noah Harari's unexpected bestseller, *Sapiens*, is that human civilisation bifurcated for the worse around ten thousand years ago, at the time of the Neolithic agricultural revolution. Harari describes how, prior to the settling of agriculture, our hunter-gatherer ancestors would have spent just a few hours per day in a rather leisurely pursuit of a variety of foraged fruits, seeds and meats whose nutritional value far outstripped what we have endured over the majority of subsequent cultural history. Wheat changed everything, however – as would have come as no surprise to the fastidiously glutophobic Stiegler. Its cultivation demanded vast quantities of land-clearance and back-breaking labour, both human and animal, forcing workers of all species into densely packed 'permanent settlements that would be hotbeds for infectious diseases', the earliest cities.¹⁶⁶ Our ancestors' dependence on a monocultural, carbohydrate, diet moreover led to mineral deficiencies and tooth decay, plus heightened susceptibility to drought and immunological weakness. Echoing Harari, the Yale-based political and agrarian theorist James C. Scott writes that 'the late Neolithic multispecies resettlement camp involved a lot more drudgery than hunting and gathering and was not at all good for your health. Why anyone not impelled by hunger, danger, or coercion would willingly give up hunting and foraging or pastoralism for full-time agriculture is hard to fathom'.¹⁶⁷ Harari's answer to this question suggests time was of the essence. Had the revolution been sudden, then we might have noticed its effects quickly enough to change our minds. But its advent played out via a gradual decrease in infant mortality, the deferral of which only until later childhood coincided with a corresponding growth of anxiety in the face of death. The 'fateful miscalculation' to transition to sedentary agriculture worked as a trap, habituating – we might better say automating – Neolithic peoples into routines of living and expectations of imagined luxury, to which they clung well past the point of their costs outweighing the benefits.¹⁶⁸ Scott's alternative response is less subtle, but more compelling in the 'deep historical' evidence he provides for it. The surrender was not willing, he argues, but the consequence, intended or otherwise, of a creeping culture of simplification that did away with a huge variety of bio-, noo- and technodiversity, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre*, all for the sake of making cultivars sufficiently visible to emerging regimes of taxation. To see how this transformation played out, let us return to what, with hindsight, we might call the original *intermittent society*.

In his seminal 1972 work of speculative anthropology, *Stone-Age Economics*, Marshall Sahlins famously hypothesised that the Palaeolithic era preceding the Agricultural Revolution might well be described as 'The Original Affluent Society'. At least '90% of human history', according to this argument, 'was in no sense a struggle for existence'.¹⁶⁹ Sahlins cites then-contemporaneous studies of Australian bushmen, which showed twentieth-century hunter-gatherers managing to yield a caloric surplus of food despite working only for one to two days per week. The rest of their time was spent 'intermittently' sleeping, resting, and doing occasional bits of tool-craft.¹⁷⁰ The absence of more

intensive labour would have been enough, he suggests, enough to generate and legitimate a stereotype of indolence among nineteenth-century colonial settlers, who wondered how the bushmen filled their days before the new arrivals ‘taught them to smoke’ and left them ‘begging’ for tobacco.¹⁷¹ Sahlins raises that last point light-heartedly, but, noting the evidence that wheat, too, is thought addictive – not least in the form of the beer that has historically been used to pay workers – we might still wonder in passing what role addictogens played in the subsequent coercion and automation of labour.¹⁷² A future return to that question will build on the ‘beer before bread hypothesis’, according to which ‘large-scale, likely alcohol-fuelled feasting’ and ritual intoxication ‘began well before settled agriculture’.¹⁷³ More important for now, however, is the re-elaboration of Sahlins’s thesis of ‘barbarian’ affluence by Scott, for whom ‘we have surely underestimated the degree of agility and adaptability of our prestate ancestors’.¹⁷⁴

In speaking of ‘agility and adaptability’, Scott alludes to the contemporary, highly ideological language of resilience as flexibility, which, as argued by both Bernard and Barbara Stiegler, nowadays tends to consist in a globalised monoculture of market-led solutions: the elimination of intermittence and spare capacity in favour of a narrow range of supposed consistently reliable outcomes, from high-yield crops and just-in-time delivery to a paradoxical fetishisation of both nomad mobility and relentless, often deskbound, labour.¹⁷⁵ At the heart of this ideology of adaptation is an emphasis on the individual’s capacity to absorb environmental perturbation, or what Georges Canguilhem, defining health, called the ‘margin of tolerance for the inconstancies of the milieu’.¹⁷⁶ And yet the discourse ultimately neglects the very means by which we become adaptable, namely the ability to transform environments that Canguilhem terms normativity, identified as the fundamental activity of life itself: ‘life, as not only subject to the milieu but also as institution of its own milieu’.¹⁷⁷ The capacity of the organism to organise its surroundings into a milieu, or lifeworld, through the ‘institution of new norms’ means that it is not simply passively adapting to environments imposed from without. In the case of humans, our normativity is specifically technical, playing out through our use of technology and the acquisition of transformative, anti-entropic knowledge that we gain from mastering tools.¹⁷⁸

Expanding on Canguilhem, Stiegler argues that the institution of norms through technics simply goes by the name of ‘work’, understood as transformative of both the ‘who’ and the ‘what’, and theorised in opposition to the entropic labour of adaptation better described as ‘employment’. ‘Perhaps we can call “work” everything that, in the technical form of life, which is also its noetic form, differs from and defers entropy by intensifying “negentropy”’.¹⁷⁹ To work, in other words, means to translate the potential (*dynamis*) opened up to thought by our tool-use into the building of a future, towards which we can project ourselves in the form of desire. Elsewhere, this deferral of entropy translates into a relaxation of Darwin’s natural selection, by allowing the modified environment to reduce or take the strain of the selection pressures acting on the organism.¹⁸⁰ By contrast, strip down the possibilities of self- and world-transformation, and we experience a dramatic narrowing in our margins of tolerance for change.

To make the same point, Scott draws on the contemporary evolutionary theory of ‘niche construction’, which emphasises both the inadequacy of adaptation for understanding the participatory role organisms play in ecosystem engineering,¹⁸¹ and the way niche-constructing organisms can decrease

local entropy levels within their milieus, for example by enhancing food-production, albeit at the cost of increasing entropy beyond them.¹⁸² Reworking Sahlins, what we might call the prestatal intermittent society revolves around ‘a deliberate disturbance ecology in which hominids create, over time, a mosaic of biodiversity’ that lifts them above mere subsistence.¹⁸³ Far from adhesion to a single way of living, be that the allegedly precarious existence of ‘just’ hunting and gathering, or the surplus-generating, hence supposedly failsafe, security of domestication and sedentary agriculture, Neolithic life consisted in a hybrid multiplicity of strategies for flourishing. In practice, so-called hunter-gatherers of the Fertile Crescent were more like hunter-gatherer-forager-pastoralist-fishers and landscape engineers, engaged in everything from flood-retreat and slash-and-burn agriculture to the domestication of cattle and wild grains. Much is made of the technologies that rendered sedentarism possible, and whose accumulation by nomads, hitherto unable to afford the weight and baggage of anything but minimal equipment, was in turn made possible by sedentarism: sickles and handled blades for harvesting, baskets for carrying, pestles for grinding and underground, often waterproof, pits for storage, among others.¹⁸⁴ But their invention, alongside techniques for building ‘drive corridors’, weirs, nets, and tools for smoking, drying and salting’, largely preceded the dominance of domesticated agricultural grain states.¹⁸⁵ We can accordingly see that the ‘intermittence’ of Neolithic intermittent society offers more to a Stieglerian reading than linguistic happenstance.

First developed in around 2003-4, in *Acting Out* and the closing chapters of *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, Stiegler’s theory of intermittence builds on a reworking of the Aristotelian hierarchy of three distinct, but overlapping vegetative, sensitive and intellective (or ‘noetic’) souls.¹⁸⁶ At the heart of this theory is the idea that only the divine ‘unmoved mover’ is permanently noetic. The majority of animals spend most of their time sleeping and eating, which is to say, vegetating, becoming intermittently reactive to sense impressions when looking to reproduce, Aristotle suggests. We, supposedly higher, mortals alternate between vegetation and engagement in acts of experiencing the world and are, for the most part, only *potentially* noetic, except for fleeting moments of elevation when, through the translation of intellectual potential (*dynamis*) into the energetic output (*energeia*) of work, we participate in the divine.¹⁸⁷ Stiegler insists that the three souls are compositional, not oppositional: knowledge emerges in the abstraction from sensory experience, and can be destroyed when our sensations of the world are prescribed by technologies that no longer afford us the prospect of interpreting how we use them. The intermittent dormancy that to the eye of the colonial explorer looks like the vegetative subsistence of lazy hunter-gatherers, cannot be separated out from their sensorial reading of flora, fauna and landscapes, which paves the way, in turn, for the sublimation of sensory experience into the transformative action of niche- and self-construction, mediated by the mastery of myriad Neolithic tools. With the reorganisation of societies around sedentary farming, however, this diverse range of technical skills gave way to a life devoted exclusively to the ‘harrowing and sowing’ of fixed field farming. Scott describes ‘the late Neolithic revolution [...] as something of a deskilling’, where the know-how needed to harvest ‘a wide spectrum of wild flora’ and fauna is sacrificed for the narrower specialisms put to work in cultivating ‘a handful of cereals and a [...] handful of livestock’.¹⁸⁸ Their loss, in other words, coincided with proletarianisation and a dramatic collapse in the (bio-, noo- and techno-diverse) modes of resilience provided by alternative routes to sustenance. As we shall see, it also coincided with the sacrifice of Neolithic peoples’ ability to ‘read’, or interpret,

and thereby transform their milieus to their forced adaptation to a new environment, imposed on them from above for the purpose of making the people themselves legible.

2. Against Calculation – From Intermittence to Covid-19

Far from being a uniquely modern, capitalist, phenomenon, it was calculation that spelled the disappearance of the original intermittent society. Tubers can be planted in secret and left in the ground until needed; legumes grow and ripen continuously, making it hard to calculate yield throughout the year. 'Looked at from the perspective of a state tax collector', 'hunting and gathering, maritime fishing and collecting, horticulture, shifting cultivation, and specialized pastoralism' were all 'fiscally sterile', or 'what might be called nonappropriable subsistence activities', whose products 'were so dispersed and mobile, and their "takings" so diverse and perishable, that tracking them, let alone taxing them, was well-nigh impossible'.¹⁸⁹ Even if offering worse nutritional value for more labour-intensive cultivation than lentils, chickpeas and potatoes, among others, cereals like wheat, barley, millet and maize grew above ground in the same fields, year-on-year, in seasonably predictable, regular, yields, which could moreover be readily divided into precisely measurable subunits of husks and grains. They were more 'legible', in Scott's memorable phrase, which is to say, 'visible, divisible, assessable, storable, transportable, and "rationable"'.¹⁹⁰ This legibility is what secured the widespread imposition of settled agriculture, in spite of the huge costs of mandating their cultivation: the slave labour needed to produce a surplus; the ensuing crowding and disease that become inseparable from 'multispecies resettlement camps'; and the loss of both resilience and 'the exuberant diversity of livelihoods' that coerced monoculture entailed.¹⁹¹ Those doing the mandating, we might add, were part of a new and leisured governing class, afforded the time to think, create, and pursue specialisations in craft, writing and science. Intermittence became the privilege of a select few, no longer spread throughout the population with rough equality. The resulting hierarchies could endure even during agricultural off-seasons, when the feudal lords of intermittent agricultural workers coercively redeployed them to Sisyphean building projects, like the first city, Çatalhöyük, and later the pyramids, for which their exhaustions were paid in meat and beer.¹⁹² Such projects undoubtedly owed much to farming. The evolutionary geographer Jared Diamond has described how the food surpluses of settled agriculture allowed for the emergence of 'complex social organisation' and 'complex centralized societies [...] uniquely capable of organizing public works' like the pyramids.¹⁹³ Returning to Scott, however, we might wonder how far this really amounts to a complexification, as opposed to a lethal simplification of social organisation.

Against the Grain's focus on states' 'making legible' in the Neolithic Fertile Crescent is borrowed from and extends the thesis originally laid out in James Scott's seminal work of anarchist theory, *Seeing Like a State* (1998), on the simplificatory schemas imposed by state apparatuses for the sake of facilitating government. Scott's earlier book begins with modernity and the concretisation of society around science and capitalism. He focuses, in particular, on the eighteenth-century emergence of commercial forestry and the ultimately disastrous strategies of artificial selection that, in the light of his later work,

we can read as a continuation of the practices employed at the time of the Neolithic revolution. With the passage of time, the promotion of a small range of visibly consistent, albeit fragile and high-maintenance crops over the engineered mess of biodiversity that had preceded them, is expanded and refined to catastrophic perfection. When the demand for wood as fuel began to exceed supply in Northern Europe, nascent practitioners of forestry science responded by replacing old-growth forests, made up of a vast range of different trees, with standardised and uniformly regimented, fast-growing and high-yield softwood monocrops, like Norwegian spruce and Scotch pine, planted in neatly visible, countable rows. The forestry equivalent of fixed fields was moreover cleared of all undergrowth and fallen leaves to facilitate access, harvesting and replacement.

In the short run, this experiment in the radical simplification of the forest to a single commodity was a resounding success [...] The productivity of the new forests reversed the decline of the domestic wood supply, provided more uniform stands and more usable wood fibre, raised the economic return of forest land, and appreciably shortened rotation times.¹⁹⁴

Things nonetheless went badly wrong – almost immediately for the localities hitherto dependent on the woodland, though it would take the eighty-year duration of tree rotation for the economics to unravel. ‘The monocropped forest was a disaster for peasants, who were now deprived of all the grazing, food, raw materials, and medicines that the earlier forest had afforded’;¹⁹⁵ who were proletarianised, in other words, by the destruction of the locality to which their knowledge strictly pertained. And while the first generation of trees far exceeded expectations of growth, this is now thought to be because of the fertile topsoil produced by the old-growth leaf mulch, which housed a vast array of biomass that disappeared once the economic imperatives of forestry management decreed the removal of deadwood and ground cover. The depletion of tree diversity also made for decreasing resilience, with mono-arboriculture revealing itself particularly susceptible to stressors like disease and fluctuations in the weather. As epidemic proportions of species-specialised pests, plus drought, cold and soil-depletion, took hold, what had begun as processes of simplification, soon became entangled in increasingly more complicated attempts to manage the unintended consequences of forestry science. Ever greater quantities of ‘fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, or rodenticides’ failed to offset declining rates of growth, leading to the artificial raising and reintroduction of previously-resident organisms, naively expected to thrive in ‘impoverished habitats’, or locations stripped of their once defining locality.¹⁹⁶ ‘In this case, “restoration forestry” attempted with mixed results to create a *virtual* ecology, while denying its chief sustaining condition: diversity’.¹⁹⁷

Scott’s collapse in diversity principally refers, here, to the loss of the resilience provided by a forest’s biodiversity, but another, more Stieglerian, take on the phrase is also implicit – notably, in the form of the monoculture of intellectual and technical practices that characterises the industrialisation of forestry. This is the focus of Stiegler’s reconstruction of much the same argument, in *Constituer l’Europe* 2 from 2005, where he lays the groundwork for a concept of ‘noodiversity’ that captures the productive variety of irreducibly local, ecologically specific, forms of technical practice and the thought to which

they give rise, to which he subsequently returns only towards the end of his life.¹⁹⁸ Without making Scott's link of continuity between the industrial and Neolithic revolutions, Stiegler dates the nascence of a cultural obsession with calculation to somewhere around 1780, coinciding – as per Scott – with a growing interest in management and the technoscientific adaptation of life to the exigencies of profit. The shift, he suggests, is signalled by the rise of the factory and an ensuing movement away from the 'performativity' of work, construed in terms of niche- and self-construction, and towards the modelling of labour around calculable performance. The horse and later the machine become the motors 'to whose performance the proletarian will have to adapt their own performance',¹⁹⁹ adjusting to function mechanically and automatically, which is also to say, unthinkingly – both because they have no time to think while labouring, and because exhaustion leaves them unable to do so. Forced to surrender both the intermittence of rest and, accordingly, the prospect of *noēsis* in order to compete with automata in a manufactured struggle for survival, the worker is 'bestialised', which is to say, reduced to a combination of imprinted habits and sensory responses.²⁰⁰ This 'homogenisation' of worker behaviours around a model of automated, competitive, performance is 'entropic'. 'Negentropy', by contrast, 'is the diversification of types, just as indispensable to social life as biodiversity is in increasing the vitality of organisms.'²⁰¹

Fast forward another two-hundred years and we see the impact of man-made *anthropie* on a society collapsing under the weight of its exhausted monoculture of resilience. The current pandemic of Covid-19 is already prefigured in the contagion and exhaustion that result from the calculations of the agricultural and industrial revolutions. The exploited labour of the early states goes hand-in-hand with the proliferation of contagion. The crisis of managed forestry similarly foreshadows the risk of diseases – including zoonotic ones unearthed by deforestation – ripping through genetically homogenised megafarms, where weakened poultry and livestock are so heavily dosed up with prophylactic antibiotics that pathogens have become resistant.²⁰² Megafarm transmission may have played a comparatively minor role in the case of Covid-19, but the prevalence of comparable conditions in urbanised human societies has placed us in a similar position of precarity. We have known since the early days of Coronavirus just how far we are dealing not simply with a 'pandemic', but moreover a 'syndemic', which is to say, a contagion whose virality results from social circumstance just as much as biology.²⁰³

One's chance of being affected by SARS-Cov-2 is subject to a range of markers including housing size and density, access to greenspace and one's type of work. It is also inseparable from our obsessive, (self-)exploitative,²⁰⁴ availability for labour: the cytokine storms thought linked to Covid's fatality occur most vehemently in those with poor mental health,²⁰⁵ sedentary lifestyles,²⁰⁶ sleep deprivation, burnout²⁰⁷ and obesity-inducing diet, including diabetes²⁰⁸ – all of which symptomatise, in turn, the deleterious organisation of Western societies around a concept of life defined by non-stop productivity. We needn't look far to see an analogy of the pine tree, propped up by pesticide and fertiliser as a condition of meeting its required yields of wood fibre, in the figure of the underslept and overstressed worker, denied the repose of intermittence and kept running not just by the fear of losing their deliberately precarious employment, but by a panoply of addictogenic *pharmaka* that serve to expand our margins of tolerance for environmental perturbation: coffee, sugar, screen time, painkillers and

antidepressants, among others. The syndemic has rammed home the message that we already knew but preferred not to see play out in milieus of enforced adaptation right across the planet, namely that being ‘always-on’ is the cause of widespread breakdown. Following several global lockdowns, what now stares us in the face is the forced choice of a return to life as intermittence, or an only intermittently functioning society.

Conclusion: Against Simplification

The theoretical biophysicist Stuart Kauffman has argued that the emergence of life should no longer be deemed miraculously improbable. ‘Under rather general conditions, as the diversity of molecular species in a reaction system increases, a phase transition is crossed beyond which the formation of collectively autocatalytic sets of molecules suddenly becomes almost inevitable. If so, we are birthed of molecular diversity.’²⁰⁹ For Bernard Stiegler, ‘in the era of the hegemony of probability calculations’, which is to say, of neoliberal monoculture and globalised homogeneity, the diversity necessary for life is itself what has become improbable. ‘The improbable is diversity – in this case, biodiversity, noodiversity. The probable’, played out *ad infinitum* through the same sets of broken market solutions, ‘is the entropic tendency towards the elimination of the diverse.’²¹⁰ Our overdependence on a single lifestyle has led to critical exhaustion – and with it, the ever-greater probability of a dramatically improbable event escaping attempts to render life both fully predictable and automatic.

It is the fear of this kind of unintended consequence that leads someone like Frédéric Neyrat to balk at the idea of nature as a ‘construction’, desanctified to the point of eliminating the psychological barriers to geo-engineering technologies like atmospheric phosphate-seeding, which offer ‘solutionist’ quick fixes for climate change, but at the cost of potentially uncontrollable repercussions.²¹¹ The combination of Scott and Stiegler allows us to posit an alternative to this rather simplistic conception of nature, however. Speaking in an interview in 2016, Stiegler rejected the idea of ‘nature’ as somehow distinct from artificial selections, which is to say, from the tools through which we categorise, understand and manipulate the organic world. ‘The problem is not “nature and culture”. It is the processes of individuation’: of the chemical diversity that gives rise to new organs and organisms when their interactions pass the threshold from an aggregate of elements to a new functional whole; of the mutual constitution of the *who* and the *what*, whose combination gives rise to the reinvention of both, and so on.²¹² We see this already in the diversity of Paleolithic food strategies, where the multiplicity, or noodiversity, of styles of hunting and farming contributes to the enhancement of biodiversity. Complications come not from artificial selection *per se*, either in the narrow, Darwinian, sense of selective breeding, or the expanded Stieglerian one of technics as ‘the pursuit of life by means other than life’.²¹³ Rather, they arise when the effect of these selections is simplification.

We need not see nature as either metaphysically (or biologically) distinct, nor even as *simply* constructed. We should see it, rather, as a vast and diverse accumulated reservoir of organic retentions and inadvertent protentions, a memory for the future with enough iterations behind it to have generated anticipatory solutions that can only be dreamed of by our own efforts to manage the consequences of its depletion through simplification. The history of that simplification is inseparable from overcompensatory attempts to rein in an increasingly unmanageable array of unintended consequences, all seemingly converging towards a near-future of monumental collapse. None of which is to suggest that we should or could – except, perhaps, in the aftermath of looming ecological disaster – lose ourselves in a fantasy of Neo- or even Paleolithic living. The challenge is rather to think through the role that contemporary technologies, and above all, a new, noodiverse society of intermittence, might play in counteracting that history.



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