four pathways through chaos: research program & course proposal

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Here I want to lay out the elements of a coordinated research-education-writing proposal and submit them to the critique of anyone who cares, in order to hopefully find some partners for the implementation and realization of what could be a new and more socially significant way of learning and producing cultural/intellectual content. Let me know what you think! – BH

“The revolutionary takes what the people give in confusion and returns it in precision.” I heard that bit of leftist wisdom at an informational meeting for the US Social Forum and realized that at the very least, I could apply it to the 60 or 70 published essays I’ve cobbled together from multitudinous sources over the past ten years. The essay by its nature has the strength of singularity, delving deep into some particular juncture of cultural potential and social reality, of facts on the ground and human aspirations, so as to exceed the determinant forces. The logic of exemplarity makes the essay useful to others: it casts a sharply focused pool of light whose very clarity suggests the immense obscurity of all the depths that remain unplumbed. Yet an essay is never a systematic theory. Its objects, its referential context and its metaphorical structure are too specific to be applied anywhere else. The essay is “writely” in the sense that Barthes described in S/Z: it stimulates some other writer’s efforts to do something completely different. Yet at a certain point, the sophisticated meandering of the writely is just egotistic bullshit. What you owe us is a solid theory, man, something other people can understand and apply wherever they need it. OK, so that’s what I’m gonna produce. But not alone.

I want to teach a course but not a traditional one. What appears most promising is to develop a multi-authored networked archive combining simple bulletin-board functions with a specific problematic, a syllabus, lecture outlines, extensive source texts and reference materials as well as links to some of my own texts, and ultimately the finished elements of a complete theory of power, conflict, emancipation and political solidarity in contemporary times. This evolving networked platform — necessarily password protected to elude the limitations that copyright places on the free dissemination of knowledge — would be used as a basis for actual seminars, whether in academic or cultural contexts where I would be paid by some constituted institution, in DIY contexts where the motivation of a group would be sufficient to organize the sessions, or, absent myself, in unforeseeable settings where the strength of the materials and the course articulations could be utilized by whoever so desired and was able to make them bear unexpected fruit. In the best of cases, the seminar would unfold dialogically or multilogically, with other theoretical eggheads who would propose counter-examples, problematizations or completely alternative formulations of the subject, while nonetheless taking care to recognize that there is an original thinking-and-working being in the (virtual) room with them. The students of such a course would obviously be free to develop their own investigations and exceed the reach of their putative and temporary masters (let’s remember that Marcuse did his Habilitationschrift with Heidegger, and intact, three-quarters of contemporary activism was invented in the 60s, and I guess we won’t be rid of flexible accumulation anytime soon, whatever the crisis. Four pathways, heavy layers, lots of chaos.

A few further notes on feasibility. One can easily imagine that at a place like 16 Beaver in New York, interested participants could present films and artworks corresponding to each of the periods and problematics, as well as generating an intense closing discussion on artistic and activist strategies in the present crisis. One could easily imagine that a course like this could be team taught with another researcher or group of researchers who would be able to critique certain orientations, propose other bibliographies, concepts, epistemologies, finalities, or even polemically oppose certain decisions, as part of a personal investigation or maybe even, if things worked out particularly well, as part of a shared writing process. The interesting question on the receiving end would be, who would want to take such a course? What does this kind of “student” look like and above all, desire? How would they participate, contribute, take over?

An encouragement and a sense of social and technical possibility comes from the courses currently being proposed at the The Public School (for architecture). Many people seem to be using the impressive aaaaargh.org site as a text archive for proposed classes, as in this one on attention economies (the texts are archived on AAAARG, the class is taught at the Public School). The use of the AAAARG site appears like a good thing because it is becoming a socially recognized format, offering lots of use value to anonymous visitors. Other platforms could, of course, offer similar functionalities; the question is where one can give the most encouragement to a non-normalized, free and open ethic of learning and elaborating technical, organizational, artistic and political knowledge.

All of this remains to be done and the outline above is just a first step, there remains a lot of work before anything is realized. The researcher and media critic Armin Medosch is working on very similar questions and has agreed to help develop some of the content and argumentation as part of his own projects. This text was initially published on the collaborative platform he has put together, The Next Layer. A context does exist for four seminar sessions and a public lecture at the invitation of the European Graduate School in Toronto, which is a good stimulus for moving ahead. The production of other, perhaps more experimental contexts depends on finding a few collaborators. So let’s see what happens.

See:
for links to downloads of most of the suggested readings.
Further readings could include the first two essays from James Boggs' 1964 book The American Revolution ("The Rise and Fall of the Union" and "The Challenge of Automation"); the great book by Paul Edwards, The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America; James Beniger's The Control Revolution; and... let's stop there for the moment.

> The second path, Power's Reversals, will examine various facets of the 1968-70 uprisings in terms of the Foucaultian-Deleuzian understanding of the reversal of macropolitical power into micropolitical agency. The thing to grasp is not the return of a suppressed term at a higher and more inclusive level (as in the master-slave dialectic), but something entirely different: autonomy, non-identity, dispersal. Key texts will be Mario Tronti's The Strategy of Refusal and a chapter from Deleuze's Foucault (Strategies or The Non-stratified: the Thought of the Outside).

Further readings: you choose in free dispersal...

> The third path, Pocketbook Control, will consider the new form of hyper-individualized control society that emerges over the last three decades from the crisis of the 1970s and the global redeployment of capitalism. It takes the iPhone as an exemplary vector of control. Key texts here are Suely Rolnik's Geopolitics of Ejecting, chapters 10 and 11 of Michel Foucault's course at the Sorbonne, "The Birth of Biopolitics", and my essay "The Absent Rival: Radical Art in a Political Vacuum".

Additional readings could include André Gorz's wonderful book that blew our minds in France in the 1990s, Martyr du present, richesses du possible (in English Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society); Steigler's short and very criticizable book which should be out soon, For a New Critique of Political Economy; and some selections from the Koolhaas book, The Harvard Guide to Shopping, particularly the Sze Tsung Leong text called "Ultimate Spaces."

> The fourth pathway, Metamorphoses, will propose a theory of collective metamorphosis through artist/activist practice, based on Guattari's assertion that what we need is not a microphysics of power, but a micropolitics of desire. This kind of collective transformation takes place against a stark background of control, as portrayed for popular consciousness in the film "The Matrix." The key text here would be my essay "Guattari's Schizoanalytic Cartographies: The Pathic Core at the Heart of Cybernetics."

For additional reading, check out some of my texts on artist/activist projects from Escape the Overcode or explore the references in "Guattari's Schizoanalytic Cartographies." And for anyone who doesn't know them already, definitely take some time with two of Deleuze & Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus: "How to Make Yourself a Body without Organs" and "Apparatus of Capture."

So there's the outline and it can also be do-it-yourself if anyone has such curiosity.

One more hint for the user's manual: Since the outset of the industrial revolution (if not the Middle Ages) none of this cultural stratigraphy ever really disappears. It's always one layer, then the next layer. Much of the Fordist organization of society has survived published it despite the latter's utter disapproval. In short, such an endeavor would evince the dignity befitting autonomous men and women in search of the others who can help them on their quest to forge a collective framework of existence.

The theory I want to work deals with the forms of subjectivation, cooperation, control and struggle against capitalist and imperial oppression in the so-called post-Fordist or neoliberal period, 1978-2007 — which has clearly come to its crucial turning point. But to characterize this period fully requires a step back to the Keynesian-Fordist manufacturing economy and the American-led world-system (1939-67), from whence runs the financialized neoliberal order springing. Both of these periods display a large number of systemic regularities, and indeed, they seem to call for an "ideal type" of individual, of the kind which I initially described in my 2002 text, "The Flexible Personality." The ideal type — a cruel but useful sociological fiction — is a kind of composite portrait of the real individuals whom a given period calls forth, and to some extent actually produces, in order to support its major functions, to staff its command posts and carry out its most pressing tasks, but also to sustain its forms of leisure, intimacy, family life, consumption and so on. In short, the ideal type is the existential figure of systemic regularity, the embodiment of a set of norms. But to understand how we move from one socio-economic paradigm to the next means overcoming the norms. It means examining the periods of crisis when systemic regularities break down: 1929-1938 (the Great Depression), 1968-77 (May 68, the US defeat in Vietnam and the years of relative Third World independence), and above all, 2008? (the implosion of neoliberalism and the decline of American hegemony — or "hegemony" as Arrighi says). What's being proposed is not only a theory of historical regularities, but also of historical change.
Crisis is as important to define as stability, but it's exactly what escapes definition. It occurs when there is no longer an acceptable “fit” between four broad dimensions of social life: a mode of industrial production, a system of economic redistribution, a cultural horizon of beliefs and expectations and an international military/monetary order. It's inseparable from conflicts over the political structure of society and the direction, meaning and value of its development. Periods of crisis contain the seeds of far-reaching transformations in technoscience, labor organization, artistic expression and democratic legitimacy; but only some of those seeds take root and grow to the point where they come to saturate the ecology of a stable system. How do the process of systemic change unfold in lived experience? What are the pathways toward a new social order? To reach the level at which change actually occurs demands a micropolitical understanding of the ways individual subjects and small groups learn to tolerate and “inhabit” the dominant social structures, and above all, how they unlearn their tolerance for domination and seek new ways of living. Thus the four macropolitical dimensions have to be characterized, not only as attributes of an abstract social whole, but as concrete factors weighing upon and configuring the multiple “worlds” of distinct groups and individuals. Here we can make use of Guattari’s fourfold cartography of subjectivity, and attempt to characterize both the ideal types and certain real groups in terms of the existential territories that they inhabit, the aesthetic constellations that help open up their sensibilities to the larger environment, the social formations or “machines” that they construct with others, and the relation to abstract ideas that continually destabilizes them and precipitates them into difference (or what Guattari calls “chaos”). The search for an understanding of how people change in chaotic times is what motivates this project. Because we are living in chaotic times. To move through the present period of crisis will require both the capacity to innovate, and the perspicacity to place bets on which trends will ultimately cohere into a new stable order — if any ever do...

The construction of a theory like this entails mountains of reading and long periods of tenuous, trial-and-error interpretation, which is why the context of a seminar could be very useful. But the expression of the theory should be succinct, striking, impeccably logical and rich in artistic metaphor: that’s the work of writing. Fortunately I have done some of the initial research already, and sedimented it in the aforementioned confusion of essays. For the initial courses I will draw on a few of these texts, particularly from my new book Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society. These essays will be augmented both with the source materials on which they are based and with new materials arising from the process of investigation. This archive can be further enriched by anyone who wants to develop parallel or contradictory research. For the moment I am conceiving a meta-theoretical introduction followed by four chapters — “Four Pathways through Chaos.” The pathways could be entitled:

- Glaciated Territories
- Power’s Reversals
- Pocketbook Control
- Metamorphosis

- The Introduction will review the existing theories of historical change in the capitalist societies, focusing on the driving force of technology, the functions of regulation and socio-cultural norms, the role of conflict and the periodization of major crises. Key texts will be The Flexible Personality and the more mainstream, yet still extremely searching and sophisticated analysis by Carlota Perez, Technological Revolutions and Techno-Economic Paradigms.

Additional readings could include Giovanni Arrighi and Beverley Silver’s short, dense and amazing book, Chaos and Governance in the Modern World-System or David Harvey’s classic on The Condition of Postmodernity (esp. part 2, “The poltical-economic transformation of late twentieth-century capitalism”).

- The first pathway, Glaciated Territories, will study the development of Keynesian-Fordist industrial society and the emergence of first-order cybernetic control systems during the Cold War phase of American global hegemony. Norbert Weiner’s automated anti-aircraft gun forms the earliest example of a first-order control system; Jay Wright Forrester's Industrial Dynamics shows its applications in the factory; the Worldwide Military Command and Control System marks its military apogee during the Vietnam War; and commercial television and the feedback loops of the Nielsen ratings system express it in all the banality and commonness of everyday life. Key texts will be Antonio Negri’s landmark essay, Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State Post-1929 and my own Future Map.