Anxiety in the Society of Preemption: On Simondon and the Noopolitics of the Milieu

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Abstract

Responding to the power of algorithms to operate within our daily lives, this article proposes to think of our contemporary moment as that of a society of preemption. Preemption defines the action of taking away something before an opportunity emerges or is actualized. By coupling anticipatory algorithms and preemptive technologies—like the premeditation of future events prior to their occurrence, as exemplified in popular culture by *Minority Report* (Massumi, Hansen)—state apparatuses force upon their subjects a modality of control that forestalls behaviors according to a massive system of data-mining and digital profiling. In this society of preemption, data are not simply voluntary exteriorized onto technical supplements (Stiegler); they are extracted from individuals by devices that preempt events and program behavior. Such a society calls for a noopolitics of the milieu, a politics that focuses on the relation between psychic and collective individuals. Whereas noopolitics has mainly been understood as a pejorative term for the hegemonic operations of power on knowledge production (Lazzarato, Terranova, Hauptmann), this article proposes a more nuanced definition of noopolitics, reconceptualized from a power that controls to a power that operates on people's memory, behaviors, and desire. Such a noopolitics takes place in a milieu (Canguilhem, Simondon) whose relational ontology and technicity now crucially address today's society of preemption.

Society of Preemption

Preemption is an operative logic that exercises its power on both a structural and affective register. On a structural level, preemption modulates a system in which information is transmitted. In computing, preemption refers to the interruption of a process in order to privilege one task over another. An example of the operation of preemption is found in the logic of shareholders. In that context, preemption means the right to buy shares before they are offered for sale to the public. In other words, preemption is the appropriation of something before it emerges as a common opportunity. In that sense, structural preemption does not necessarily involve active and willing participation by people. As a temporal logic, it refers to a situation where one opportunity is predicted to benefit some people over others. On an affective level, preemption induces feelings of doubt and uncertainty that prevent individuals from projecting themselves into a future of their own. In daily exposure to algorithmic platforms that are designed to facilitate online interaction, these feelings are induced by

pictures, links, and comments that overwhelm the user, who is left feeling out of the loop and out of time, like a constant fear of missing out. By preempting opportunities while showering users with new content, such logic creates a anxiogenic structure that manipulate the user's temporal relation to digital devices. On this affective level, preemption takes the form of a constant process of uploading that forestalls the possibility of a meaningful encounter with others.

Central to preemption as both a structural and affective operation is the deployment of preemptive war and communication strategy. In Brian Massumi's words, this preemptive logic "positively contributes to producing the condition for its own exercise" (Massumi 2015: 196). Preemptive logic creates the circumstances of its deployment by forestalling other possibilities from emerging. In the case of geopolitics and war, threats are a form of preemption. This type of preemption has been increasingly deployed since September 11, 2001. Because the logic of preemption creates its own conditions of possibility, preemption is first and foremost a "time concept" that "denotes acting on the time before: the time of threat, before it has emerged as a clear and present danger" (Massumi 2015: VII). Thus, the threat becomes the motives of a political strategy that imposes a hegemonic interpretation of a situation to satisfy a political agenda. Here, the logic of preemption refers to the making up of a problem to justify the means toward an end that is usually unknown to the people affected by the execution of these strategies. Often carried by motives that are kept undisclosed, the logic of preemption deploys strategies that are hard to counter-act. Preemption feeds the black box of political strategies.

As an operative logic, preemption is the opposite of anticipation, in the sense that the latter is a step toward the preparation for potentialities to be actualized in the future. Anticipation is grounded in an imaginary modality that is the potential to create one's own relation to reality. Whereas anticipating is caring for what could come next, preemption is the implementation of one single possibility in the present, and the simultaneous reduction of a virtual and potential future to a single line of interpretation. In other words, anticipating is an immanent process of belonging to potentiality, while preemption responds to a transcendental fear that imposes a unilateral way of conceiving the future. Preemption is taking one interpretation of the real as the measure of all potentialities. In this sense, preemption terminates potentiality, whereas anticipation opens up the possibility of actualization. The society of preemption is a society of beings that are deprived of multiverse becoming. In this society, individuals are less likely to be able to change and evolve because the processual operation of becoming otherwise in the world is restrained. The preemptive structure of thought and action short-circuits the possibility that individuals have to act and be otherwise in the world.

In a society of preemption, not only are opportunities preempted before individuals, but data about individuals are being collected before they are recognized as information

by individuals. While machines require their users to exteriorize their knowledge and skills voluntarily, users of digital devices now see their agency being stolen away by algorithms that automatically target all kinds of relations, movements, behaviors, habits, and patterns to draw a digital double of the self. Such digital doubles are the algorithmic shadows of individuals. But this shadow does not follow the user. On the contrary, the user blindly follows the shadow of suggestions, feeds, offers, and advertisements that preempt their behavior. Preemption is thus automatized and systemic, meaning that its programmatic power discovered in the digital a structure that multiplied the expansion of its logic. I say digital structure, because what is at stake in our society of preemption is the newly engendered relationship between operation and structure imposed upon the individual (whether psychic or collective).

The main target of the society of preemption is the genesis of the individual's desire and will to persevere in its mode of existence. Because of the transcendental structure of its logic, preemption imposes an anxiogenic structure of belonging and communication. Digital technologies develop wide networks that overwhelm their users through new assaults on their psyches. One example is the highly addictive structure of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which reduce social interaction to a scoring grid of likes, comments, and shares. By reducing affection, attention, and interaction to a social ranking, these platforms induce stimuli of dopamine and instant satisfaction in their users who seek more and more validation. It is, therefore, not a surprise to learn that founders and CEOs of such massive communication apparatuses are slowly acknowledging that the same tools, apps, and networks are forbidden in their household. Justin Rosenstein, creator of the like button on Facebook, talks about the toxicity of addictive feedback loops and the impulse to check messages, pointing to the hijacking of the user's mind by media technologies (Lewis 2017). While the structure onto which such a society builds its power is pretty straightforward, namely, a mix of economy of attention, pre-crime policy, and an algorithmic marketing of the self, the consequences of such preemptive power are pervasive.

A society of preemption uses algorithmic platforms to preempt behavior by systematizing online profiling. It is not a surprise that massive-scale manipulation and psychological experimentation have been successfully deployed on these same networks. I am referring here to the study on emotional contagion led by Facebook and Cornell University in 2014, which influenced the newsfeeds of 600,000 people to manipulate emotion (Chamber 2014). Based on the tweak of what Facebook users saw in their newsfeed, Facebook skewed content to influence their mood. Researchers were interested to see if positive or negative information could weigh on what the user chose to write on their wall. While quite a controversy was produced by such manipulation of information, this type of research is part of a wider network of influence made possible by media technologies today. To talk about the anxiogenic condition is to pay attention to the symptoms of malaise in our current digital situation, a situation mainly shaped by

anxiogenic networks of societal manipulation. To address such symptoms—and by symptoms, I refer to the work of Paolo Vignola, who developed a symptomatology to diagnose our contemporary society—a new form of ontology is required. Such an ontology considers together both the value of a structure (as an axiology) and the becoming technical of our mode of existence (as an ontology). This axiontology, developed by Gilbert Simondon, will be an entry point in this article to address the anxiogenic condition produced by our society of preemption.

Anxiogenesis of the Individual

For Simondon, the individual is a transductive reality; neither a substantial being, nor an element in a *rapport*, the individual is first and foremost the reality of a metastable relation (Simondon 1989: 79-80). Important here is that Simondon locates the individual outside of the human-nonhuman paradigm. For him, what matters it the relation of operation and structure that is in tension within the individual, which means that the main operation of the individual (its indivuation) is not only pertaining to the category of the human. What matters in the notion of the individual is a phasual change that takes place in a structure (Simondon 2005: 535). The individual develops itself in sequences and for this reason Simondon's ontology is particularly helpful to grasp the challenge brought about by the digital. Because the individual is an entity that reaches its concreation through phases, both individual and milieu are to be understood as two phases of being (Simondon 1989: 228). When the milieu, understood as one phase of being, becomes highly toxic and thus anxiogenic, the resonances of this being are wired to match the frequency and intensity of the milieu that is now operating at the speed of light, in the case of the digital. Being dephases itself in both individual and milieu and it is this operation that grounds the becoming of a being according to its different and thus phasual evolution. Thus, the individual is only one aspect of the operation of individuation (Simondon 1989: 228). Only the couple individual-milieu is useful to reach indivuation, understood as the *déphasage* of both individual and milieu (Simondon 1989: 228). For Simondon, who develops an "allagmatic" theory of operation, what is central in relation to our knowledge of the individual is to grasp the *rapport* that is being established within an individual between a structural knowledge and an operational knowledge (Simondon 2005: 535). By ontogenesis, Simondon designates the becoming of a being ("*le caractère de devenir de l'être*"), that through which a being becomes in the sense that it is ("*ce par quoi un être devient en tant qu'il est, comme être*") (Simondon 1989: 13). By grounding the notion of the individual in becoming, Simondon distinguishes the notion of being from that of substance, highlighting the constitutive and yet ever-changing dynamic central to being as becoming. The pre-individual being is a being that is not constituted of phases. Only the individual can de-phase itself.

In "Problématique de l'ontogenèse," Gilbert Simondon poses that a neurotic person is someone who suffers from a constant mismatching between itself and its role in society (Simondon 1989: 147). An individual being is neurotic when no societal function fits and when no collective position is made to expand its singularity. By giving a definition of a neurotic person as someone who suffers from a constant state of nonbelonging, Simondon moves away from a conception of the subject in relation to itself to introduce the notion of psychic individuals in relation to collective individuals. Here the notion of individual is not a surrogate for the notion of subject. The individual defines that which is constituted of multiple tendencial energies creating a tension that is in constant response to the milieu in which both psychic and collective individuals evolve. Contrary to the granted subject of modernity, the individual is a precarious being: it relies on an idiosyncratic adaptation to an ever-changing milieu and it depends upon auto-constitutive energetic fields. As such, the individual is that which overflows its own existence. In this sense, the center of individuality is not an empty whole waiting for tendencies to make it full. On the contrary, the individual is a being in tension, it is a reality that is inscribed in intensities, which creates a coherent and yet ever-changing field of possibility. When the individual is preempted from the possibility to openly develop its potential it creates a conflict that disrupts the coherence of its relation between itself and society.

Simondon emphasizes the relational condition of neurosis and defines the neurotic as a person who has lost the bond of signification that ties together psychic and collective realms of reality. Anxiety is therefore produced in a milieu that undoes the realm of signification of both psychic and collective individuals. According to Simondon, pathologies are localized in the pre-individual. He does not, however, mean that pathologies are genetic. Pathology takes the opposite process of genesis, "advancing backward," unweaving the significations built within the field of the pre-individual. Such movement is an anxiogenesis, a genesis *à rebour* or regressive genesis that finds in the lack of potential and forestalled becoming the fuel to undo the realm of shared significations. Contrary to Martin Heidegger, for whom anxiety "discloses Dasein as being-possible" (182), Simondon locates anxiety within an inversion of signification. Anxiety takes place when the individual misses other individuals with whom they could have shaped a transindividual world of signification. Simondon understands alienation as a rupture between content and form within psychic life, a rupture that takes place when an associated milieu no longer regulates the dynamism of forms. While anxiety makes one feel awkward, its invasive ability to rupture the present operates backward. A neurotic relation to others is a relation that not only lacks signification, it is a regressive relation that empties out the possibility to connect and exchange (Simondon 1989: 203). The consequence of this regressive relation is found in the subject that tries to compensate for its lack of significant relation to others. Here the relation is not one of communication divided between signifier and signified. On the contrary, it is a

preindividual realm of exchange where what matters is the significant potential of the exchange. Anxiety becomes a moment in which the present loses its actuality by flattening the past and the future into one blended landscape in which the individual attempts to flee from the lack of dense experience.

Anxiety has created a collective incapacity to care for the world. Whereas fear is a response provoked in the subject by a real or localizable danger, anxiety is a vague feeling whose source is difficult to grasp. "Anxiety is an emotion without action, a sentiment without perception, it is a pure ringing out of the subject with itself" (Simondon 2005: 112). The anxiogenesis that has developed in our society of preemption is caused by the narrowing of future possibilities imposed upon individuals, thus prevents them from collectively investing in the future. This anxiogenesis creates a crisis of futurity in which the question of becoming otherwise in the world is inherently tied to the technologies deployed to facilitate or restrain such evolution. While what makes life worth living is grounded in the significations shared by individuals—whether through rituals, traditions, cultures, or skills—the society of preemption forestalls singularity by programming and ranking behaviors. One alarming example is the development by the Chinese government of a massive Social Credit System based on the ranking of its 1.3 billion residents. This credit system, which will be mandatory by 2020, is based on rating and ranking behaviors. Similar to the dystopian sci-fi episode *Nosedive* of the TV show *Black Mirror* where people rank each other for every interaction they have with the cashier, their neighbors, etc., individuals will be measured by a score ranging from 350 to 950 that will dictate who gets to apply for college, who gets to have access to a passport, who gets to leave the country, and so on (Botsman 2017).

In this context, the question of governmentality and surveillance is taking on a new dimension in the 21st century, as is being analyzed by Antoinette Rouvroy under the important concept of algorithmic governmentality, whose target is the "unrealised part of the future, the actualisation of the virtual" (Rouvroy 2016, 10). Such governmentality calls for a new form of politics that is aware of the predictability and programmability of behaviors as new forms of discipline. To address what the society of preemption does and to unveil the strategies it deploys onto its subject, one must turn to new forms of political assaults developed in the area of digital policing and profiling. Such a society calls for a noopolitics, a politics that is grounded in the most important and yet difficult aspect of living matter, namely the relationship between psychic and collective entities.

Noopolitics of the Milieu

In her introduction to the edited volume *Cognitive Architecture*, Deborah Hauptmann poses noopolitics "as a power exerted over the life of the mind, including perception, attention, and memory" (Hauptmann 2010: 11). Such noopower takes as its main target

the life of the mind, a formulation that we find in other authors such as Tiziana Terranova, who discusses Maurizio Lazzarato's work on the notion:

> In as much as noopolitics affects what he [Maurizio Lazzarato] calls a *second bios,* the life of the brain, it involves a politics of attention and memory. Such a politics should be capable of giving expression to the virtual power of immaterial events of subjectivation, which materialize in the bodies that actualize them – in the experiences and actions that they are capable of performing, in the lives that they live. (Terranova 2007: 141)

For Lazzarato, noopolitics defines "new relations to power, which take memory and its conatus (attention) as their object" and "the modulation of memory would thus be the most important function of noo-politics" (Lazzarato 2006: 186). Important here is the deployment of both disciplinary *dispositive* and biopolitical *dispositif*, *dispositifs* of noopolitics (Lazzarato 2006: 186-187). The distinction between these *dispositifs* lies in the different degrees of deterriorialization that they deploy. Because noopolitics operates at the most deterritorialized and immaterial level of power—namely at the level of action between brains—Lazzarato claims that noopolitics is that which reorganizes all other power relations. As such, noopolitics designates for these authors a politics that focuses on the *nous*, understood as the life of the brain (Neidich 2010), both its architecture and its plasticity. However, the systemic deployment of preemptive strategy in the psychic and collective milieu of individuals requires that we pay deeper attention to operations that divide entities through mechanisms of appropriation, annihilation, and manipulation of behaviors. Noopolitics cannot only mean neuropower, as neuropower is only one aspect of the systematic hijacking of individual's ability to expand their being. Furthermore, noopolitics does not only mean the politics that targets the "general intellect and mental disposition" (Hauptmann 2010: 11) as this definition implies a very reductive definition of the *nous* as only pertaining to the human. *Nous* does not define the brain as suggested by Lazzarato's reading of noopolitics, which is not grounded in a definition of *nous* but of power and its genealogy in contemporary thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault (Lazzarato 2006: 180). As such, *nous* cannot be reduced to the mind and the intellect as it offers a much richer and more complex concept that actually deconstructs the dichotomy between mind and body. *Nous* defines a mode of sensing the world, of belonging to it intuitively. It is not the brain as in human intelligence, it is an inventive category that takes the soul as its main force of becoming. In this context the soul is not necessarily human and most individual, including a rock, can possess a *nous.*

Noopolitics defines the relational politics that is located between psychic and collective individuals. This politics takes seriously the idea that any form of psychological reality is a transductive relation expanding between the world and the

self. Noopolitics addresses the politics that targets noodiversivity, which includes nootechnics, nooethics, and nooaesthetics, among others. As such, noopolitics designates a politics that focuses on the milieu of psychic and collective behaviors proper to a living organism. Such a milieu, or *Umwelt* as analyzed by Jacob Von Uexküll, is not simply an environment (as in the geographical *Umgebung*) nor a universe of science (as in *Welt*) (Canguilhem 1952: 111). The milieu of our contemporary noopolitics is a field of intensity where living organisms are being acted upon by power strategies that either restrain or expand their value and significations. The *modus operandi* of such noopolitics is no longer based on a power to control but a power that functions by implementing signals and stimuli to produce preemptive operation. These operations are grounded in a *dividual power* that operates by dividing structures of significations into machinic sequences that can be automatically implemented and reproduced on a large digital scale.

Because there is no milieu that exists in itself, because there is no *en-soi* of the milieu, a noopolitics of the milieu must focus on the operative power that is now shaping behavior on a massive scale. Such power is grounded in the preemption of possibilities and potential, and for that matter the technical is a political question that not only needs to be addressed but that requires a noopolitics to be counter-acted. A general theory of the milieu would take technical causality as its condition of emergence. As such, then, it is crucial to relate to the milieu as that which is constituted by and constitutive of the relational tendencies of the structure where actions can be deployed. What defines a living being is its capacity to make up its milieu, meaning that that which lives is qualified by its capacity to compose a milieu where life itself can be cultivated (Canguilhem 1952). The milieu gives value to the individual to extend that it is an energetic interaction that allows the operation of transduction. Individuation is a condition of existence of both milieu and individual. The milieu is political to the extent that it bridges both psychic and collective individualities. For Foucault, the milieu is both the medium (*support*) and element of circulation of an action (Foucault 2009: 20). As such, the milieu is a condition of relation. While the core operation of a milieu is that of individuation (namely the becoming individual of a living entity), the operation of co-constitutive milieux (biologic milieux, natural milieux, cultural milieux, technical milieux) is that of transduction (namely both the transfer and the change of one energy field onto another structure).

Talking about anxiety in relation to the technical milieux in which individuals evolve requires that we pay attention to the toxicity that is being produced by platforms that have less and less to do with openness and more with preemptive control over people's behavior. Whereas anxiety was considered a fundamental mode of being in the world (Heidegger 2010), the collective scale of anxiety in today's algorithmic society is an alarming symptom of a malaise that is spreading like a pandemic disease in front of which contemporary theory lacks critical distance. To pose that our society is producing

anxiogenesis is to pay attention to the symptoms of collective malaise proliferating in our contemporary moment. Such symptoms take the form of depression in the psychic life of individuals, the form of unstable, extremist, and highly destructive behaviors. But to go beyond the symptoms and reach the roots of the malaise, one needs to address the technical causality that creates such an anxiogenic society. The ambivalent power of the technical to be both a remedy to a problem and a poison to a situation not only calls for a pharmacology (Stiegler) but an axiontology of our various milieux.

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