

Article

## Mapping a Precarious Ethics in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Semiocapitalism, the “New” Cognitariat, and Chaosmosis

---

*Raniel SM. Reyes*

**Abstract:** This article seeks to map out a precarious ethics in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic. Primarily, I reconstruct Franco Berardi’s theorization of Semiocapitalism. The post-Fordist configuration of semiocapitalism has introduced novel forms of production, relations, and oppression, as well as spawned the emergence of a new virtual class—the ‘cognitariat.’ I expand the cognitariat’s scope by including the students and teachers. In aiming to provide a more nuanced chronicle of the plight of the cognitariats, I seek the help of Byung-Chul Han, specifically, his diagnosis of the contemporary disappearance of community. Against the backdrop of the pandemic and the comprehensive utilization of virtual education, semiocapitalism strengthens and the cognitariat’s precarity exacerbates. As such, the proliferation of psychopathologies, such as fatigue, depression, and suicide, especially in Third World countries, aggravates. Lastly, I diagram some pathways of becoming-chaoides that can serve as vectors of mutation and emancipation from the different forms of barbarism today. Diagramming a precarious ethics today necessitates the creation of minoritarian refrains, ruptures, and novel forms of subjectivation in the “new normal.”

**Keywords:** semiocapitalism, cognitariat, COVID-19 pandemic, becoming-chaoides

### I. Semiocapitalism: A Differential Semiotic Engine

In the contemporary epoch, alienation bears a peculiarly complex configuration and force. From its classical orientation during the 1960s, it is now determined by the mentalization of the labor process and the

© 2021 Raniel SM. Reyes

[https://www.kritike.org/journal/special\\_issue\\_2021b/reyes\\_december2021.pdf](https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2021b/reyes_december2021.pdf)

ISSN 1908-7330



enslavement of the soul, which is not “simply the seat of intellectual operations, but also the affective and libidinal forces that weave together a world: attentiveness, the ability to address, care for and appeal to others.”<sup>1</sup> Our souls or desiring energy, Berardi elucidates, “is trapped in the trick of self-enterprise, our libidinal investments are regulated according to economic rules, our attention is captured in the precariousness of virtual networks: every fragment of mental activity must be transformed into capital.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, our contemporary world can be described meaningfully through Jean Baudrillard's theorization of hyperreality or the simulacrum. In this novel reality, models and abstractions are not merely produced without any geographic reference; instead, they are generated in a way that they precede or engender any sense of territoriality.<sup>3</sup> Berardi adheres to this claim and further argues that simulacrum serves as the nerve center, if not the central element of what he calls ‘semiocapitalism.’

Berardi's theorization of semiocapitalism is greatly influenced by his friend Felix Guattari. In *Soft Subversions*, the latter opines that “capital is a semiotic operator that seizes individuals from the inside.”<sup>4</sup> and seeks to totalize the whole society. Meanwhile, Berardi conceptualizes semiocapitalism as a differential machine where “capital flux ... coagulates semiotic artifacts without materializing itself.”<sup>5</sup> As a post-Fordist regime of production, semiocapitalism's incessant generation of information flows acts as the driving force of capital valorization. Furthermore, this new system subjugates society's nervous system and not only the physical energy of the workers in the factory.<sup>6</sup> The automatization of mental activity, language, and imagination in this period effectuates novel forms of alienation or what he describes as the precarization of mental labor in cyberspace. In other words,

---

<sup>1</sup> Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, trans. by Francesca Cadel and Guiseppina Mecchia (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2009), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Felix Guattari, *Soft Subversions: Text and Interviews 1977-1985*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, intro. by Charles J. Stivale, and trans. by Chet Wiener and Emily Wittman (California: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, 2009), 212; cf. Gary Genosko, ed., *Felix Guattari in the Age of Semiocapitalism*, *Deleuze Studies*, 6, no. 2 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Franco Berardi, “Schizo-Economy,” in *Substance*, 36:1 (2007), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Generally, Critical Theory advocates a more culturally oriented struggle for social criticism and emancipation. It decentralizes the proletariat's role as the only revolutionary class. As such, there is no longer a single social class that would ultimately guide social theory, criticism, and struggle. Since all social class is susceptible to oppression, Horkheimer claims that “it is possible for the consciousness of every social stratum today to be limited and corrupted by ideology, however much, for its circumstances, it may be bent on truth” [See Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1989), 242]; cf. Raniel Reyes, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of 'Becoming-Revolutionary'* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 162-189.

## 122 MAPPING A PRECARIOUS ETHICS

semicapitalism utilizes the radical potentials of the digital revolution towards its exponential and unremitting evolution.

Today, many of our daily activities and intersubjective relations are mediated, expedited, and operated through infomachines, such as online banking, buying, and learning, to name a few. Moreover, the rise of the digital revolution has dramatically transfigured our psyche and mental environment. While it expands our psycho-cognitive imagination and perception, it also radicalizes human sensibilities. Berardi cogently explicates this observation in *Heroes*: “The fact that human beings learn more vocabulary from a machine than from their mothers is undeniably leading to the development of a new kind of sensibility. The new forms of mass psychopathology of our time cannot be investigated without due consideration of the effects of this new environment, in particular the new process of language learning.”<sup>7</sup> In my view, the effects of excessive exposure to techno-devices do not only curtail the individual’s language learning. More importantly, it spawns psychiatric symptomology, particularly attentional problems and hyperactivity, anxiety disorders, and depression. Of course, these effects should not be merely seen as linguistic or neurodevelopmental problems, for they engender individual and community debasement.

Additionally, excessive exposure to techno-devices decreases the individual’s bodily relation or communication with others. In the case of children, they experience virtual communication with non-territorialized entities and images. Since these bodies evade territoriality, their ability to understand non-verbalized signs and recognize and empathize with other people is not cultivated and enhanced.<sup>8</sup>

Semicapitalism pathologizes sensibility, sensitivity, and empathy, not only of the young, but more importantly, of the cognitive workers. This mutation of the psychic and linguistic interaction may also be at the root of the contemporary precariousness of life. The financial deterritorialization that occurs in the age of semicapitalism fashions a post-bourgeois class—the ‘cognitariat.’ Whereas Hardt and Negri theorize the multitude as a revolutionary class,<sup>9</sup> Berardi defines the cognitariat as a non-territorialized

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> See Flecha, R., C. Pulido, B. Villarejo, S. Racionero, G. Redondo, E. Torras “The effects of technology use on children’s empathy and attention capacity,” NESET report (2020), doi:10.2766/947826. NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training initiated by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define the multitude as the singularities that elude totalization because they act in common and are characterized by incessant becoming and internal multiplicity [See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 100].

class responsible for cognitive labor (net trading, business process outsourcing, and high-tech immaterial production).

Precarity or precariousness does not only depict the state of labor in the age of global deterritorialization. Instead, it also represents the fragmentation of the social body, the fracturing of self-perception, and the perception of time. Time no longer belongs to the cognitive workers, for they are already erased from the workspace, and time is turned into a vortex of depersonalized, fragmentary substance which can be acquired by the capitalist and recombined by the network-machine.<sup>10</sup> In other words, labor's precarization vanishes the cognitariat in exchange for abstract fragments of time. Thus, a semioproductive life is defined and overwhelmed by symbols characterized by operational, affective, emotional, imperative values. Indeed, the sophisticated assemblage of these signs cannot work without unbridling networks of elucidation, decoding, and conscious responses. Echoing Berardi in *The Soul at Work*, "Each producer of semiotic flows is also a consumer of them, and each user is part of the productive process."<sup>11</sup>

The cognitariat's nervous system is manipulated and totalized by semiocapitalism. In Berardi's words, "Cognitive workers were motivated to invest their creativity in the process of production, in expectation of the success and profit that would be their reward—they were persuaded that work and capital could be forged together in the same process of mutual enrichment. Workers were encouraged to think of themselves as free agents."<sup>12</sup> The plight of cognitive laborers does not only include the exhaustion of their cognitive faculty or intellect. More importantly, it likewise affects their concrete existence, i.e., their bodies, sexuality, and the unconscious. Unlike the explicit violence rendered by traditional oppressive systems or organizations, semiocapitalism inculcates somatic habits and norms where blind obedience acts as the greatest virtue and competition and acceleration comprise the game's rules. At the same time, creativity and critical thinking, among others, serve as the supreme vices.

Precariousness invades every space of social life and permeates the expectations and the emotions of individuals, whose time is fragmented, fractalized, cellularized.<sup>13</sup> The precarization of labor is the nemesis of sensibility, creativity, and critical thinking. Moreover, the *other* mutates into a disembodied adversary, and the self becomes its own butcher. Therefore, solidarity and resistance, in Berardi's words, are merely possible through "the

---

<sup>10</sup> See Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 137.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ibid.*, 203.

spatial proximity of the bodies of laborers and the continuity of the experience of working together.”<sup>14</sup>

## II. The Birth of “New” Tragedies

### *Students and Teachers: The Cognitarians of the “New Abnormal”*

Since its origin in Wuhan, China, the COVID-19 virus has engendered multifaceted physiological, psychological, economic, and political problems that recognize no sociocultural boundaries. In several advanced societies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America, its populace’s accelerated mobility has aggravated the spread of the virus and has strengthened surveillance capitalism. Meanwhile, in some Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia<sup>15</sup> and the Philippines,<sup>16</sup> the virus has exposed not only the poverty of their health care systems, but also the fragility and danger of political power. The politicization and militarization of the pandemic have resulted in blatant human rights violations, billions of debts, massive unemployment, and alarmingly high cases of coronavirus infections and deaths, among others.

Although the sociopolitical aspects and consequences comprise a research route worth pursuing, I wish to pursue a different direction in analyzing the effects of the pandemic. Scholars from psychology, medicine, and public health disciplines etc., have already done their fair share in exploring the different psychopathological impacts of the pandemic on people, especially students and teachers. My contribution lies in diagnosing the problem spawned and aggravated by the pandemic, in conjunction with semiocapitalism, from the perspectives of philosophy and cultural studies.

One of the most affected sectors during the pandemic is the education sector. Prior to this global tragedy, practices, and policies related to accreditation, pedagogical retooling, and research productivity, to name a few, are relatively justified since they comprise integral parts of the academic playing field. However, not everything that can be quantified in the academe matters.<sup>17</sup> As such, practices and policies must only be configured based on

---

<sup>14</sup> See *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>15</sup> “Indonesia: Weak Public Health Response to Covid-19 Greater Efforts Spent on Law Undermining Labor, Environmental Rights,” (13 January 2021), <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/indonesia-weak-public-health-response-covid-19>>.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Robles and Raisa Robles, “Late and slow motion: where the Philippines’ pandemic response went wrong,” in *South China Morning Post* (1 February 2021), <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3122257/late-and-slow-motion-where-philippines-pandemic>>.

<sup>17</sup> See Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2012), 120.

some quantifiable objectives and measurable outcomes. As Filip Vostal lucidly explains in *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time*, “Academics today ... must cultivate a metric mindset, adopt performance, and productivity discipline, publish in the right journals, ... get cited and learn to exist and thrive in regimes of audit, surveillance, ‘excellence’, ‘accountability,’ and business-driven administration structures, often justified by neoliberal assumptions.”<sup>18</sup> Excessive positivization of educational instruction, processes, and pedagogy purges meaning, creativity, and other learning possibilities. In other words, positivistic education repels and operationalizes experiences, ideas, and social behavior.<sup>19</sup>

The various contingencies engendered by the pandemic become more problematic and nuanced because of the compliance *ethos* or metricized educational system enforced on the people of the academe, specifically the teachers and students. From fractalization of labor time, the cognitariats are hunted by an omnipresent obligation to perform, submit, and achieve, against the backdrop of this desolate time. The magnitude of the pandemic is certainly unthinkable in those areas where people only live from hand to mouth or experience various forms of impoverishment. In a newspaper article, “Caring, not conforming, is what schools need now,” the Filipino Dominican priest Jesus Miranda writes, “Education does not have to stop. But it has to change from being a high-maintenance repository of combustible papers back to its original form of being a noble vehicle of learning and caring. ... One advantage in the education sector is its being a community. No one has to be alone in suffering physically, emotionally, and psychologically.... Indeed, schools must relearn to become caring communities.”<sup>20</sup> Miranda earnestly reminds us that education presupposes a community—a space of solidarity, compassion, and holistic development. However, when the compliance *ethos* or metricized educational system serves as the sole regulative fuel of instructions and learning, the possibility of authentic relations and critico-creative pedagogy, grounded in an ethical sense of community, is besmirched or obliterated.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Filip Vostal, *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time* (United Kingdom: Palgrave, 2016), ix.

<sup>19</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Jesus Miranda, OP, “Caring, not conforming, is what schools need now,” *Manila Times* (18 April 2021), <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/04/18/opinion/columnists/caring-not-conforming-is-what-schools-need-now/865077/>>

<sup>21</sup> See Edberto Villegas, “Liberalism, Neoliberalism and the Rise of Consumerist Education,” in *Mula Tore Patungong Palengke: Neoliberal Education in the Philippines*, ed. by Bienvenido Lumera, Ramon Guillermo, and Arnold P. Alamon, 19–30 (Quezon City: IBON Foundation, 2007).

I agree with Thomas Sergiovanni's argument in saying that relationships in a community are defined by "personalization, authenticity, caring, and unconditional acceptance—found in families, extended families, neighborhoods, and other social organizations."<sup>22</sup> In this noble objective, the cultivation of an encouraging, creative, and fluid *agora* among all the community members, and not only among the teachers and students, is imperative. A more specific articulation of Sergiovanni's argument can be found in David Cormier's article, "Rhizomatic Education: Community as Curriculum." In this article, he opines that the community should in fact act "as the curriculum, spontaneously shaping, constructing, and reconstructing itself and the subject of its learning in the same way that the rhizome responds to changing environmental conditions."<sup>23</sup> If isolated from the larger society, the fate of the academe is imperiled because it can pliantly convert into a repressive capitalist mechanism fecund in manufacturing oedipalized subjectivities.<sup>24</sup>

However, contrary to Sergiovanni's assertion, the project of a community in this challenging time is nearly impossible, especially if the resources that would define our quest remain conventional and myopic. If our traditional ethical values, such as sensibility and empathy are already debased *ab initio* due to people's excessive exposure to digital technology, how is a community possible today? Likewise, I suppose that reducing all the social problems into a community problem, disregards other issues intricately embroidered in the assemblage of semicapitalism, the pandemic, and other societal predicaments. Given these complexities, clamoring for the return of the "old" community appears as a futile venture.

During the pandemic, people from different walks of life converted their homes into workplaces. Effortless as it may seem, this adjustment has resulted in myriad problems, especially to the marginalized and the Third World populace. More specifically, they are encumbered by the scarcity of resources, such as a decent study space, electronic gadgets, and a stable internet connection. This daily misfortune is fairly illustrated by Athira Nortajuddin in "Philippines: Crisis in Education?":

In a dining room of a house in a city, a nine-year-old  
child sits in front of his laptop, engaging in a class

---

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Sergiovanni, *Building Community in Schools* (San Francisco: Josse-Bass Publishers, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Dave Cormier, "Rhizomatic Education: Community as Curriculum," in *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 4, no. 5 (June/July 2008), <<http://davecormier.com/edblog/2008/06/03/rhizomatic-education-community-as-curriculum>>.

<sup>24</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 84-105.

through Zoom or Google Meet. Next to him is his little sister ... on her new tablet ... attentively listening to her English teacher. All her 15 classmates are connected as well. At the same time, a 10-year-old boy, miles away, is taking turns with his five other siblings to use the only tablet they own to connect to his online classroom .... His teacher sometimes sends him homework through *WhatsApp*, but he can only access it at night through his father's smartphone when he returns home from work. He has not seen most of his classmates for many months and has not even heard from some of them as they are rarely online.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, the above description would even appear as ideal compared to those whose families have almost nothing. As such, many students dropout from school, while some secure part-time jobs while enrolled in a limited number of units. In a 125-page report prepared by the Human Rights Watch, “‘Years Don’t Wait for Them’: Increased Inequalities in Children’s Right to Education Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic,”<sup>26</sup> the internationally-renowned organization emphasizes the massive inequality engendered by school closures. The heavy reliance on virtual learning amplified the unequal opportunities, resources, and internet access that students experience during the pandemic. Although the modular distance learning practice acts as an alternative to online education, it is still hampered by numerous problems magnified and aggravated by the pandemic. For those non-reader students residing in mountainous areas where electricity, food, and illiteracy are the primary problems, the effects of the pandemic are unimaginable.

Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to improve the education system through timely infrastructures, proactive and practicable mechanisms, and humane policies. Last March 2020, student governments from the top four universities in the Philippines, namely: Ateneo de Manila University, University of the Philippines - Diliman, De La Salle University - Manila, and the University of Santo Tomas, submitted a petition to the Commission on Higher Education voicing out their concerns on the complex transition from Face-to-Face to online learning at the middle of the pandemic. According to the said group, “Adding more workload for

---

<sup>25</sup> Athira Nortajuddin, “Philippines: Crisis in Education?” (17 March 2021), <<https://theseanpost.com/article/philippines-crisis-education>>.

<sup>26</sup> “Years Don’t Wait for Them’: Increased Inequalities in Children’s Right to Education Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic,” (17 May 2021), <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/05/17/years-dont-wait-them/increased-inequalities-childrens-right-education-due-covid>>.



the students increases their burden and contradicts the purpose of the lockdown, which is to help their families prepare and adjust to the situation at hand .... [T]here is an issue about the lack of environments conducive to learning at home and the effectiveness of the online lectures."<sup>27</sup>

The pandemic does not only disclose the fragility of human existence, but it also exposes the negligence and failures of governments in addressing inequalities in society, especially in the education sector. The lack of adequate infrastructures to confront these matters serves as a microcosm to the inability of governments to address various societal problems. The Duterte administration, for example, fuses incompetence with militarism in dealing with the pandemic. As Michael Beltran describes, "since the lockdown went into effect, he [Duterte] has peddled the narrative of ... 'undisciplined' citizens as responsible for the ensuing problems; brought up unsubstantiated activities of guerrilla groups as threats to government aid efforts without conceding any missteps in his management. On top of deploying thousands of police and soldiers ... to enforce the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Duterte has on two occasions threatened the public with all-out martial law."<sup>28</sup> A parallel strain of ineptitude is likewise observable in the Indonesian government because of its inadequate efforts in confronting the pandemic, especially in its failure to seriously invest in testing and tracing. Ahmad Utomo, one of its molecular biological consultants in Jakarta, says that the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus is being utilized to obscure the Indonesian government's mishandling of the pandemic.<sup>29</sup>

The enormous interruption to students' education has underlined the need for governments to devote serious attention and use sufficient resources to mitigate and eradicate the prevailing injustices in the educational system. Another dimension of the education system's impoverishment worth looking into is the plight of the teachers. They need to deal with personal struggles at home on top of their problems at work. According to Caroline Rayco of the Philippine Mental Health Association, teachers "don't get to express their struggles and emotions because they are expected to always be strong, because their students and community depend on them. It is important to

---

<sup>27</sup> Samantha Bagayas, "Students of Top 4 PH Schools Urge CHED to Suspend Online Classes," (25 March 2020), <<https://www.rappler.com/nation/students-top-schools-philippines-call-ched-suspend-online-classes-coronavirus-outbreak>>.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Beltran, "The Philippines' Pandemic Response: A Tragedy of Errors," (12 May 2020), <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-philippines-pandemic-response-a-tragedy-of-errors/>>.

<sup>29</sup> Al Jazeera Staff, "'It will get very bad': Experts warn on Indonesia COVID surge," (18 Jun 2021), <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/18/indonesia-covid>>.

strengthen their resiliency in dealing with the normal stresses of life.”<sup>30</sup> There was an instance when a professor needed to murmur while lecturing because he was in the computer shop due to an internet connectivity problem at home. More unfortunate news narrates a professor who turned emotional during an online class after knowing that one of his family members tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>31</sup> The same goes for students who missed classes and submission deadlines because they got infected, someone from the family tested positive, and someone died due to the coronavirus.

Furthermore, school closures are accompanied by massive displacements among teachers, which add another layer to the menacing effects of the pandemic. Some displaced teachers are compelled to look for other jobs for daily survival. Of course, the contingencies and experiences that emerged from these problems, especially those living below the poverty line, are unthinkable.

### *Becoming a Pandemic Zombie*

Inculcated in the students’ and teachers’ minds is the idea that sleep is antithetical to hyperproductivity and progress. The attempt to prolong social attention is one of the capitalist strategies towards endless expansion and fortification. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary opines that “it should be no surprise that there is an erosion of sleep everywhere. Over the course of the twentieth century, there were steady inroad made against the time of sleep.”<sup>32</sup> I fully agree with Crary in asserting that the very activity of sleep elicits resistance or interruption to capitalism’s robbery of the cognitariats’ waking life. Miserably, insomniac individuals comprise most of the contemporary social demography. Although these so-called zombies may appear as the most desirable entities of the semiocapitalist labor force, their mental and somatic energies are already exhausted.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Mariejo Ramos, “Educators confront mental health problem amid pandemic,” <<https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/07/20/educators-confront-mental-health-problems-amid-pandemic.html>>.

<sup>31</sup> Catalina Ricci Madarang, “Academic woes: Stories of teachers keeping up with online classes while caring for COVID-19 patients at home,” (April 12, 2021), <<https://interaksyon.philstar.com/trends-spotlights/2021/04/12/189438/academic-woes-stories-of-teachers-keeping-up-with-online-classes-while-caring-for-covid-19-patients-at-home/>>.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 11.

<sup>33</sup> According to Han, “The contemporary compulsion to produce robs things of their endurance [Haltbarkeit]: it intentionally erodes duration in order to increase production, to force more consumption” [Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2020), 3].

## 130 MAPPING A PRECARIOUS ETHICS

From the outside, semiocapitalism has mutated into a parasite that callously subjugates and totalizes the different aspects of the soul (creativity, expressiveness, affection, emotion) through continuous evaluation and surveillance. As Berardi notes:

Exploitation, competition, precariousness, redundancy are not perceived as the effects of a conflictual social relationship, but are internalized as deficiencies of the self, as personal inadequacies.... Cognitarians have been lured into the trap of creativity: their expectations are submitted to the productivity blackmail because they are obliged to identify their soul (the linguistic and emotional core of their activity) with their work. Social conflicts and dissatisfaction are perceived as psychological failures whose effect is the destruction of self-esteem.... Solidarity is rare. All of them feel isolated while pushed to compete.<sup>34</sup>

The internalization of external pressures and oppression as personal 'lack' resembles what Deleuze and Guattari describe in *Anti-Oedipus* as 'ethical fascism,'— "the fascism that causes us to ... desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."<sup>35</sup> The phenomenon of ethical fascism is one the most venomous aspects of the cognitariat's precarity. Given the pandemic and the comprehensive practice of an enriched virtual mode of learning, the seismic wave of self-oppression strengthens. Of course, the fact remains that external exploitation emanating from semiocapitalism and other forms of societal or Statist repression, still exist.

Since the internalization of exploitation is cunningly engineered, i.e., aestheticized by a delusion of freedom, the effects are more subtle and detrimental. Han perceives this event as the crucial moment that gives birth to what he calls the 'achievement subject'—a kind of subjectivity that provides Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of ethical fascism and Berardi's notion of exploitation's internalization more creative articulation. In *The Burnout Society*, Han explains:

Unlimited *Can* is the positive modal verb of achievement society. Its plural form ... 'Yes, we can'—epitomizes achievement society's positive orientation. Prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects,

---

<sup>34</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 166-167.

<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xiil.

initiatives, and motivation.... Achievement society creates depressives and losers.... Clearly, the drive to maximize production inhabits the social unconscious.... Therefore, the social unconscious switches from *Should* to *Can*. The achievement-subject is faster and more productive than the obedience-subject.... *Can* increases the level of productivity, which is the aim of disciplinary technology.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, the grave prohibition to sleep is accompanied by the attitude known as multi-tasking. Like sleeping, the ability to multi-task depicts an 'excess of stimuli, information, and impulses.'<sup>37</sup> In addition, multi-tasking is a microcosm of semiocapitalism's radicalization of the configuration of attention, as well as the fragmentation of perception and cognition. Again, echoing Han, "the structural change of wakefulness is bringing society deeper and deeper into the wilderness .... Concern for the good life, which also includes ... the community, is yielding more and more to the simple concern for survival."<sup>38</sup> In other words, the pandemic escalates our struggle for survival. The coronavirus converts the global village into a quarantine facility where bare life,<sup>39</sup> or something worse than it, serves as the normalcy.

In the beginning of *The Burnout Society*, Han argues that our time is not anymore determined by viruses, but by neurons.<sup>40</sup> Even though I agree that Han's formulation of the achievement society acts as a more elaborate appropriation of semiocapitalism, I think his aforesaid assertion should be partially contemporized. Pathologically speaking, what he considers as the incipient character of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e., of depression, burnout syndrome, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), among others, are worsened by the pandemic. These infarctions are also caused directly or indirectly by the COVID-19 virus and its different variants.

The "work-from-home" scheme has converted the home into a new space where the self-exploitation, in the guise of self-cultivation or freedom, occurs. Since the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel separating work from home has already vanished, work becomes 24/7. Although the cognitariats are already isolated

---

<sup>36</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (California: Stanford University Press, 2015). 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Simply put, 'bare life' refers to the sheer biological fact of life; it is the opposite of a life creatively lived, i.e., shaped by incessant contingencies and possibilities. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 1.

in their home office, their tasks and obligations continue through interminable emails and Google/Zoom meetings. As they continue to epitomize the curse of achievement subjectivity, they constantly attempt to scourge themselves.

Every time an important deadline is fast-approaching, such as a final term paper or a feasibility study, sleeping is deemed as heresy. Even though it is a natural human activity, sleep is interpreted as counter-intuitive to the principles of acceleration, productivity, and progress. In this vein, caffeinated and energy drinks, game addictions, and anti-sleeping pills, among others, function as the cognitariats' armaments. In the eyes of Berardi, this paves the way for the emergence of Prozac culture as a novel yet disconcerting character of the new economy.<sup>41</sup> Aside from becoming awake and multi-functional, hyper-excitation or -expressivity is another significant aftermath of today's semiocapitalist culture. Nonetheless, the mental energies of students and teachers are subjected to extreme mobilization and exploitation, "of a saturation of attention leading people to the limits of panic,"<sup>42</sup> amidst a society of disproportionately productive, multi-functional, and hyper-expressive individuals.

Although the competition between classmates and colleagues relatively declines due to the work-from-home arrangement, self-competition/exploitation increases enormously, in the form of panic, fatigue, depression, and even suicide. In *Heroes*, Berardi defines the exuberant state of panic as the "anticipation of a depressive breakdown of mental confusion and disactivation."<sup>43</sup>

### *The Pandemic's Uncharted Terrains (Tiredness, Depression, and Suicide)*

What is really tiring is not only the cognitariats' self-competition/oppression, but the solitude involved in the work-from-home arrangement. In one of Han's newest articles, "The Tiredness Virus Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue," he writes: "We are confronted with our selves, compelled constantly to brood over and speculate about ourselves. Fundamental tiredness is ultimately a kind of ego tiredness. The home office intensifies it by entangling us even deeper in ourselves."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> See Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 166.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> See Byung-Chul Han, "The Tiredness Virus Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue" (12 April 2021), <<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/pandemic-burnout-society/>>.

During synchronous online sessions, for example, it is common among teachers to wonder what their students are doing behind those black boxes, especially when the latter's cameras are turned off. They know that several students are not listening. As Galit Wellner observes: "I said my goodbyes to the students and many of them replied in kind and left the digital classroom. Shortly after, a few black boxes remained. Texting them via the chatbox did not yield any answer. Calling their name through the microphone was in vain. I realized they were like zombies, digitally present but apathetic about the course."<sup>45</sup>

Sartre is correct to underscore the necessity of the other's gaze either in the classroom or community. However, in an online class, gaze is limited to the webcam or built-in camera. Indeed, this small electronic gadget only promotes quasi-presence.<sup>46</sup> Despite the repetitive instruction to always turn the cameras on during lectures, most students still close them. Aside from a black box, the teachers only perceive the students' profile pictures. According to Nicola Liberati, the profile picture "is a face of the subjects, but, at the same time, it excludes any other 'face' of the user by limiting the perception of the other to just the selected elements."<sup>47</sup> In front of a black box or a motionless profile picture, the experience of disembodiment is accompanied by fatigue to both parties and the possibility of tarnished pedagogy and learning.

In the pandemic, the *other* is absent symbolically and physically. Today, Deleuze's pronouncement in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* that the 'people are missing'<sup>48</sup> achieves a paradoxical historicization. Even before the pandemic, the symbolic ties or activities that connect people's elbows are superseded by digitalized information and hypercommunication. Unfortunately, the 'social distancing' health protocol aggravates the already ravaged organic composition of communal life. The pandemic not only estranges the *other*, but it also converts them as potential virus carriers. The lockdowns pushed people to further compete against themselves while in the solitary confinement of their home-offices.

---

<sup>45</sup> Galit Wellner, "The Zoom-bie Student and the Lecturer Reflections on Teaching and Learning with Zoom," <<http://www.spt.org/the-zoom-bie-student-and-the-lecturer-reflections-on-teaching-and-learning-with-zoom>>.

<sup>46</sup> See Helena De Preester, "Technology and the Body: The (Im)Possibilities of Re-embodiment," in *Foundations of Science*, 16, no. 2-3 (2011), 119-37, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-010-9188-5>>.

<sup>47</sup> Nicola Liberati, "Achieving a Self-Satisfied Intimate Life through Computer Technologies?" In *The Realizations of the Self*, ed. by Andrea Altobrando, Takuya Niiakawa, and Richard Stone (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 240, <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94700-6\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94700-6_13)>.

<sup>48</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-mage*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London, Athlone, 1989), 215.

The culture of doing things corporeally and communally are indispensable factors in educational learning and pedagogy. Haplessly, the pandemic has worsened the rupture of these symbolic practices and ties. For this reason, the indispensable proximity of the students, teachers, other academic personnel, and even nonhuman objects (school facilities and equipment, for instance) are clamored and underscored. Even the presence of stubborn students, neoliberal-minded colleagues, power-tripping superiors, and dilapidated classrooms, to name a few, are ironically missed.

Despite infrastructural modifications and rigorous attempts to fuse educational learning and technology in making instructions and pedagogy more technologically mediated, many teachers still perceive virtual teaching and learning in an ancillary manner. But as the rapid surge of virus infections is followed by lockdowns, class disruptions, and suspensions, students, teachers, and academic staff have no choice but to be technologically prepared. This abrupt transformation inexorably and ideally presupposes digitally advanced electronic gadgets, fast internet connection, and a decent working space, among others.

In addition, the home transforms into a prison cell to students longing for the presence of their friends and peers—the same students who experienced and understood education and human development as collective pursuits, i.e., or against the backdrop of a community and ethical practices. For those who are already distressed by mental health problems before the pandemic, their havens convert into an Alcatraz despite being with their family members almost 24/7. This is also true for those who started experiencing mental health problems during the pandemic. While in solitude, the cognitariats perpetually compete against themselves. The world of hyperconnectivity and hypercommunication paradoxically produces narcissistic, solitary, and fatigued individuals. Communication without community engenders the cognitariat to break apart. The cognitariat, Han contends, “exploits itself voluntarily and passionately until it breaks down. It optimizes itself to death.”<sup>49</sup>

In Slavoj Žižek’s *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*, a complementary view of what Han describes as global tiredness, is elucidated. Like Han, Žižek claims that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused fatigue to everyone. In the chapter “Why Are We Tired All the Time?”<sup>50</sup> Žižek cites Han’s *The Burnout Society* only as a springboard in traversing a different pathway in juxtaposing the relationship between advanced capitalism, the pandemic, and the pathology of tiredness. Notwithstanding their convergent

<sup>49</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 14; cf. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020), 26. He extends this oppressive current to those whose works are inevitably “outside,” such as the mall sales agents, hospital front liners, and public transport drivers.

perspective on humanity's tiredness, Žižek asserts that the epicenter of exploitation is relocated to Third World countries. While Žižek thinks that Han's disquisition on the new form of subjectivization is such a profound remark, it is not the only headline of the story in the context of the Third World: "struggle and antagonisms are in no way reducible to the intra-personal 'struggle against oneself.' There are still millions of manual workers in Third World countries, there are big differences between different kinds of immaterial workers .... A gap separates the top manager who owns or runs a company from a precarious worker spending days at home alone with his/her personal computer—they are definitely not both a master and a slave in the same sense."<sup>51</sup>

Žižek opines that by looking at the case of the Third World we are provided with a nuanced configuration not only of tiredness, but also of labor-relation and oppression. In Indonesia, for example, the outsourced labor remains loyal to the old Fordist assembly-line rubric; side-by-side with the mounting domain of human care workers (nurses, caregivers, caretakers, etc.) in the Philippines. For Žižek, only the self-employed precarious workers can be classified under Han's notion of subjectivization.<sup>52</sup>

Although Žižek's observations are critically noteworthy, the semicapitalist regime remains the fulcrum of everything and social media access serves as the workers' common habitat during the pandemic. Consequently, precarity (external and internal repression) continues to mutate precipitously. In response to Žižek, Han explains, "social media turn all of us into producers, entrepreneurs whose selves are the businesses. It globalizes the ego culture that erodes community, erodes anything social. We produce ourselves and put ourselves on permanent display. This ... ongoing 'being-on-display' of the ego, makes us tired and depressed."<sup>53</sup>

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari describe depression as the state where thought escapes itself ... already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into other that we no longer master."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, semicapitalism engenders a world of chaos. Chaos comprises a world of "infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought."<sup>55</sup> The emergence of chaos mobilizes the

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Han, "The Tiredness Virus Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue," (12 April 2021), <<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/pandemic-burnout-society/>>.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham, 1994, 201; cf. Alan Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. by Enrico Caoutte, Jacob Homel, David Homel, and Don Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.



world in an ungraspable speed that blights people's appreciation and understanding of societal events, meanings, and relations.

Chaos fortifies in a world of hyperconnectivity and hypercommunication without community. In this habitat, symbolic principles and activities, such as rituals, are banalized or exterminated. Memory presupposes communal rituals, which are corporeal in nature. Rituals, as Han explicates, "are processes of embodiment and bodily performances .... They are written into the body, incorporated, that is, physically internalized. Thus, rituals create a bodily knowledge and memory, an embodied identity, a bodily connection. A ritual community is a communal body [Körperschaft], and there is a bodily dimension inherent to community."<sup>56</sup> Integral to the miscarriage of community and subjectivity is the adulteration of memory. In the semiocapitalist world, symbolic rituals, metaphors, and refrains that stabilize life or moderate a world of pure velocity and narcissism, vanish.<sup>57</sup>

As a human faculty, memory enables us to establish bodily constellations of meaning and relations with the world, with our fellowmen, and ourselves. Under the comprehensive utilization of virtual education, these capacities and values are pathologized, and as such, provides the cognitariats more opportunities to render self-exploitation through excessive positivity and ego-obsession. Writ large, the pandemic amplifies the degeneration of community, rituals, and memory, among others that define individual and collective identity. More dismally, it upheaves semiocapitalism's exhaustive totalization of the cognitariats' *soul*. Following Berardi, "there is chaos once the flows are too intense for our capacity to elaborate emotionally. Overwhelmed by this velocity, the mind drifts towards panic, the uncontrolled subversion of psychic energies premise to a depressive deactivation."<sup>58</sup>

The swift transition to a purely online mode of learning and teaching have aggravated and spawned complex problems. Indeed, I find the efforts of schools and universities to conduct online re-tooling activities and evaluations commendable. They are praiseworthy and important initiatives in preparing all academic staff to become technologically resourceful and innovative, especially in responding to the needs of its technologically savvy stakeholders. However, when teachers attend trainings simultaneously with

---

<sup>56</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> See *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 125. As Berardi adds, the cognitariats' depression "comes from the fact that our emotional, physical, and intellectual energy can't bear the rhythm imposed by competition and chemical-ideological euphoria inducers for long. The market is a psycho-semiotic space, where one can find signs and expectations for meaning, desires and projections. There is an energetic crisis that affects mental and psychic energies" (*Ibid.*, 167).

meetings, deadlines, online classes, alongside the looming threats of financial instability, state-authored violence, and virus infection, different psychopathologies emerge. Even though depression and suicide are more common among young people, teachers also experience panic or extreme fatigue. But most of the time, they simply neglect, conceal, or sublimate it, for they always need to be resilient in front of their hopeful students and loved ones.

The prevalence of suicide among the youth is one of the alarming faces of our contemporary time. According to the World Health organization, "suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in 15-19-year-olds. 77% of global suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries."<sup>59</sup> In Asian countries, the suicide rates in South Korea and Japan are among the highest in the world.<sup>60</sup> The social pressure to achieve in professional career and succeed in family life are the most common reasons for suicide in those countries.

Generally, suicide pertains to the reaction of individuals confronting the collapse of their cultural foundations and the ignominy of their dignity.<sup>61</sup> In 1977, a mass youth suicide was committed in Japan. This year, Berardi elucidates in *Heroes*, characterizes a year of turbulent and radical events not only in Japan but in the entire world: "I see the premonition of a new landscape of imagination marked by the consciousness of a future without evolution, and by the exhaustion of physical resources and of progressive energy."<sup>62</sup> He further opines that at the inner core of this period, a deeper malady was brewing, i.e., of the unceasing exhaustion of the social nervous system—a catastrophe that paradoxically fuels the relentless ascendancy of semiocapitalism.

In the last fifty years, suicide rates have increased drastically. Suicide is spreading epidemically as an aftermath of societal fatigue, emotional deprivation, and the constant assault on attention. As Berardi lucidly elucidates it:

The epidemic of unhappiness infecting the world in the epoch of capitalism's triumph has generated a wave of aggressive suicide in every area of the world.

---

<sup>59</sup> See <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>, 1 July 2021.

<sup>60</sup> See <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/suicide-rate-by-country>, 1 July 2021.

<sup>61</sup> For the Japanese, especially the youth, Hikikomori is a pathological variant of suicide. As a form of total social withdrawal, it serves as an effective means to avoid the dismal consequences of coercion, disgrace, self-violence, and misery engendered by disproportionate competition [See "Hikikomori: understanding the people who choose to live in extreme isolation," (30 October 2020) <<https://theconversation.com/hikikomori-understanding-the-people-who-choose-to-live-in-extreme-isolation-148482>>].

<sup>62</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 156-157.

Advertising reasserts at every street corner, at every moment ... the freedom of infinite consumption, the joys of property and of victory through competition. In the 1990s, capitalism mobilized an immense intellectual, creative, and psychological energy to start the valorization process of the collective intellectual network. But by imposing unlimited systematic exploitation on the human mind, the productive acceleration created the conditions for an extraordinary psychological breakdown.<sup>63</sup>

Semiocapitalism mutates into a biopolitical system in such a way that it penetrates the cognitariat's nervous systems with the ghoulish sentiment that exceptionally totalize the collective unconscious and cultural sensibility. Psychosomatic violence acts as semiocapitalism's primary weapon against the cognitariats' political solidarity. In the pandemic, this technology of domination worsens as everyone is imprisoned in their home offices and socially distanced from the others. Solidarity or the community disappeared and the cognitariats continue to practice self-flagellation and experience various psychopathologies.

Gone are the days when suicide is merely seen as a cultural and political means of killing one's life. Despair and unhappiness currently know no nation or society. Even economic growth in societies does not decrease suicide rates or does not eradicate people's discontents. In advanced economies, such as Japan and South Korea, suicide rates continue to rise every year. In Japan, the people formulated the word 'karoshi' (death from overwork)—a pathology that engenders work-related pressures, depression, and suicide.<sup>64</sup>

Suicide is likewise widespread in Third World countries. It's rampancy in India and the Philippines, for instance, is marred by more serious predicaments—further aggravated by the pandemic. On June 2, 2020, a brilliant 15-year-old student from India committed suicide.<sup>65</sup> Coming from a financially challenged family, the student failed to attend her online classes both through a smartphone and a television. Worried and depressed about her absences, she killed herself. The pandemic intensifies the fatal alliance

---

<sup>63</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 166.

<sup>64</sup> Danielle Demetriou, "How the Japanese are putting an end to extreme work weeks," (18 January 2020), <<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200114-how-the-japanese-are-putting-an-end-to-death-from-overwork>>.

<sup>65</sup> "First Case of Suicide in India," <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>>, 2 July 2021; cf. Depression to suicide: India battles mental health crisis amid Covid-19 (September 13, 2020), <[https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/stress-self-injuries-and-suicide-india-battles-mental-health-crisis-as-covid-tally-spikes-120091300331\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/stress-self-injuries-and-suicide-india-battles-mental-health-crisis-as-covid-tally-spikes-120091300331_1.html)>.

between economic and mental health impoverishment. Meanwhile, a 22-year-old college student from Iloilo City, Philippines, deliberately ended his own life last January 25, 2021. According to his mother, the student keeps on complaining about his difficulty in dealing with online classes, specifically with respect to numerous class activities and rapid submission deadlines.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, these are only some of the faces of suicide in the Third World. The fact remains that various cases of suicide and other psychopathologies stay outside the radar of the family, the school, and different governmental agencies. From a macro-perspective, the drastic surge of suicide cases in the Philippines is strengthened by the imprudent and unsuccessful governmental response to embattle the pandemic, in conjunction with the pre-existing economic and mental health malaise plaguing the Philippine society.

### III. Becoming-Chaoide in the Age of Spasm

Berardi defines ‘spasm’ as a painful vibration that compels the individual to an accelerated mobilization of nervous energies. In his words, “it is the effect of a violent penetration of the capitalist exploitation into the field of info-technologies, involving the sphere of cognition, of sensibility, and the unconscious.”<sup>67</sup> During the pandemic, the exploitation of the cognitariats’ spasmic vibration or mental and physical energies worsens.

For Guattari, the aestheticization of spasm is the function of ‘chaosmosis.’ It signals the creation of novel and non-normative forms of order—a “harmony between mind and the semioenvironment.”<sup>68</sup> Hence, chaosmosis involves a shift in the soul’s mobility towards the creation of new orders of subjectivation. For this to be possible, Guattari proposes the necessity of ‘chaoide’—an enunciation that elaborates, decodes, and averts the destructive consequences of chaos.<sup>69</sup> Through chaoide, chaosmosis envisions to re-syntonzize the cognitariats’ corporeal body of social solidarity and reactivate their creativity and sensibility. However, this initiative should not be interpreted as a means of overcoming chaos. Berardi warns us in *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*: “those who wage war against chaos will be defeated, as chaos feeds on war.”<sup>70</sup> So instead of seeking to overthrow chaos,

---

<sup>66</sup> “College student commits suicide over arduous online classes,” (26 January 2021), <<https://www.dailyguardian.com.ph>>; Cf. M. L. Tee, C. A. Tee, J. P. Anlacan, K. J. G. Aligam, P. W. C. Reyes, V. Kuruchittham, et al., “Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines” in *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2020), 277, 379–391, <10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.043>.

<sup>67</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 220.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> See *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>70</sup> Franco Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), 48.

we should befriend and struggle with it through the diagramming and the formulation of chaoides.<sup>71</sup>

The miscarriage of the Occupy Movement and the relentless fortification of capitalism prompted Berardi to envision the philosophy of ‘poetry’ as “the excess of the field of segmentation, as premonition of a possible harmony inscribed in the present chaos.”<sup>72</sup> So from the Occupy’s goal of reactivating the social body, this novel philosophy aims to revitalize the erotic body of the general intellect towards emancipation from the capitalist oppression.<sup>73</sup> Through the metaphor of poetry, our suffocation in this chaotic world can liberate us from paralysis towards breathing and solidarity. Meanwhile, in the language of Han, rituals can safeguard us from chaos—from burnout or depression. It is but an ethical imperative therefore to re-calibrate our symbolic practices and structures that promote stability, repetitions, and resonances against the backdrop of the contemporary crisis of community and ego-obsession.<sup>74</sup>

Another possible way to critically befriend chaos is via what I call ‘becoming-slow.’ Inspired by the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy, becoming-slow exhibits a minoritarian movement, which elicits prudence in confronting chaos to avoid self-destruction and capture.<sup>75</sup> As Berardi recounts in *The Soul at Work*: “It is necessary to slow down, finally giving up economic fanaticism and collectively rethink the true meaning of the word ‘wealth.’ Wealth does not mean a person who owns a lot, but refers to someone who has enough time to enjoy what nature and human collaboration place put within everyone’s reach.”<sup>76</sup>

In the context of the contemporary academe, semiocapitalism, and the pandemic, a resonance exists between becoming-slow and what Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber in *The Slow Professor* theorize as ‘slowing down.’ In a world hampered by acceleration, disembodiment, and competition, slowing down highlights the significance of the act of contemplation and the value of connectiveness and complexity. In the realm of research, for example, slowing down allows “the research the time it needs to ripen and makes it easier to resist the pressure to be faster. It gives meaning to thinking about scholarship as a community, not a competition. It gives meaning to periods of rest ... there are rhythms, which include pauses and periods that may seem

---

<sup>71</sup> See Franco Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End* (California: Semiotext(e), 2015), 11.

<sup>72</sup> Berardi, *Breathing*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> See Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 6-15.

<sup>75</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. by Constantin Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 157-158.

<sup>76</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 169.

unproductive. It allows us to shift from worrying about the annual report to thinking about what is sustainable over the long haul.”<sup>77</sup>

In terms of classroom management, moreover, becoming-slow can translate into an exercise of prudent compassion among students who are inexorably burdened by metricized principles and accelerated procedures in the academe. As a catalyst, it can likewise earnestly re-educate us that a university not centered on values formation, knowledge democratization, and cultural transformation, is no university. Similarly, it can critically remind us that a university that enhances its panoptical apparatus, rather than enhances its moral compass and moderates its movement in this tragic time, is no university. Things essential and noble cannot be accomplished overnight because they necessitate adequate time and deep contemplation. Echoing Han: “it is only contemplative lingering that has access to phenomena that are long and slow.”<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, the whole academic community should flexibly explore emancipatory potentials in both virtual and actual platforms. The “new normal” discourages any sense of nostalgia or conservatism. The virtual classroom should be transformed into a space of critico-creative educational encounter. Specifically, the intersubjective relation between the teacher and the student should be expanded into a ‘self-other-object relationship’ where they metamorphose into educational agencies whose task is to uncover and understand the meanings and complexities of the technologically mediated object of study or learning materials.<sup>79</sup> This encounter must be continuously shaped by disruptive crises and irregularities inside and outside the virtual classroom.

Since the plight of the people of the Third World is an integral part of this research, it is crucial to interrogate how education can become accessible to them in both virtual and actual platforms. Perhaps, we can begin the struggle by creating localized ways and diagramming molecular initiatives that can act as beacons of hope and vectors of transformation in the community. Instead of arriving at a one-size-fits-all solution in addressing the pathology of educational accessibility (which is intertwined with other societal problems), we should start by sharing our personal stories of redemption, formulating creative strategies, and radical projects toward novel forms of pedagogy, subjectivity, and solidarity.

---

<sup>77</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>78</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> See Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Crisis and New Beginning*, trans. by Donald Moss and Nancy Moss (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1966); Cf. K. Natalier, and R. Clarke, “Online Learning and the Education Encounter in a Neo-Liberal University: A Case Study,” in *Higher Education Studies*, 5, no. 2, (2015).

Ultimately, all these tasks and initiatives should inflate as a radical and interstitial challenge to the systemic neoliberalization of the university, the digital configurations of advance capitalism, the precarization of the cognitariat's soul, and to the different socioeconomic problems hounding the Third World.

The things I provided here only comprise some of the ways to map out a precarious ethics or maintain a creative discord with chaos. These forms of becoming-chaoide can only find their meaningful concretization and cultivation through nomadic alliances not only among the cognitariats, but also among other people of the community, disciplines, machines, and rhythms, among others.<sup>80</sup> I suppose that any attempt at redemption in the "new normal" is only possible by collectively and meticulously moving forward, mapping territories, and formulating concepts that would incessantly challenge the complex and plural enemy. This minoritarian slowness I am proposing is continuously defined by paradoxicality and disruption, on the one hand, and mutation and transversality, on the other. As Murakami aesthetically puts it:

And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure if the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's the storm's all about.<sup>81</sup>

*Department of Philosophy  
Research Center for Culture, Arts, and Humanities  
University of Santo Tomas, Philippines*

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- Athira Nortajuddin, "Philippines: Crisis in Education?" (17 March 2021) in <<https://theaseanpost.com/article/philippines-crisis-education>>.

---

<sup>80</sup> In *The Plague*, Albert Camus opines that overcoming the plague necessitates "a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these" [Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 151].

<sup>81</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 5-6.

- Bagayas, Samantha, "Students of Top 4 PH Schools Urge CHED to Suspend Online Classes," (25 March 2020) in <<https://www.rappler.com/nation/students-top-schools-philippines-call-ched-suspend-online-classes-coronavirus-outbreak>>, 11 June 2021.
- Baudrillard, Jean, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- Beltran, Michael, "The Philippines' Pandemic Response: A Tragedy of Errors," (12 May 2020), in <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-philippines-pandemic-response-a-tragedy-of-errors/>>, 11 June 2021.
- Berardi, Franco, *The Soul at Work*, trans. by Francesca Cadel and Guiseppina Mecchia (CA: Semiotext(e)).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *And: Phenomenology of the End* (CA: Semiotext(e), 2015).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (CA: Semiotext(e), 2015).
- Berg, Maggie, and Barbara Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2016).
- Bollnow, Otto Friedrich, *Crisis and New Beginning*, trans. by Donald Moss and Nancy Moss (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1966).
- Camus, Albert, *The Plague*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Modern Library, 1948).
- Collini, Stefan, *What Are Universities For?* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2012).
- Cormier, David, "Rhizomatic Education: Community as Curriculum," in *Innovate: Journal of Online Education* 4, no. 5 (June/July 2008), <<http://davecormier.com/edblog/2008/06/03/rhizomatic-education-community-as-curriculum>>, 12 June 2021.
- Crary, Jonathan, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).
- Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. Edited by Constantin Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1983).
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham, 1994).



- Demetriou, Daniella, "How the Japanese are putting an end to extreme work weeks," (18 January 2020), in <<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200114-how-the-japanese-are-putting-an-end-to-death-from-overwork>>, 3 July 2021.
- Ehrenberg, Alan, *Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. by Enrico Caoutte, Jacob Homel, David Homel, and Don Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).
- Flores, LJ, "Online classes: What the country will need to make them happen," 17 July 2020, in <<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/online-classes-what-the-country-will-need-to-make-it-happen>>.
- Genosko, Gary, ed., *Felix Guattari in the Age of Semiocapitalism*, *Deleuze Studies* 6, no. 2 (2012), 149–169.
- Guattari, Felix, *Soft Subversions: Text and Interviews 1977-1985*, ed. by Sylvere Lotringer, intro. by Charles J. Stivale, and trans. by Chet Wiener and Emily Wittman (Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, 2009).
- Han, Byung-Chul, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2020).
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Tiredness Virus Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue," (12 April 2021), <<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/pandemic-burnout-society/>>.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).
- Helena, De Preester, "Technology and the Body: The (Im)Possibilities of Re-embodiment," in *Foundations of Science*, 16, no. 2-3 (2011), 119–37, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-010-9188-5>>, 4 July 2021.
- Horkheimer, Max, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1989).
- Lewis, Tanya, and Stix, Gary, "Elon Musk's Secretive Brain Tech Company Debuts a Sophisticated Neural Implant," (17 July 2019), <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/elon-musks-secretive-brain-tech-company-debuts-a-sophisticated-neural-implant1/>>.
- Liberati, Nicola. "Achieving a Self-Satisfied Intimate Life through Computer Technologies?" in *The Realizations of the Self*, ed. by Andrea Altobrando, Takuya Niikawa, and Richard Stone, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94700-6\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94700-6_13)>.
- Madarang, Catalina Ricci, "Academic woes: Stories of teachers keeping up with online classes while caring for COVID-19 patients at home,"

- (April 12, 2021), <<https://interaksyon.philstar.com/trends-spotlights/2021/04/12/189438/academic-woes-stories-of-teachers-keeping-up-with-online-classes-while-caring-for-covid-19-patients-at-home/>>.
- Marcuse, Herbert, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).
- Miranda, Jesus, OP, "Caring, not conforming, is what schools need now," (18 April 2021), <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/04/18/opinion/columnists/carimg-not-conforming-is-what-schools-need-now/865077/>>.
- Murakami, Haruki, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).
- Ramos, Mariejo, "Educators confront mental health problem amid pandemic," in <<https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/07/20/educators-confront-mental-health-problems-amid-pandemic.html>>, 19 December 2020.
- Reyes, Raniel, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of 'Becoming-Revolutionary'* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).
- Robles, Alan, and Robles, Raisa, "Late and slow motion: where the Philippines' pandemic response went wrong," in *South China Morning Post*, (1 February 2021), <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3122257/late-and-slow-motion-where-philippines-pandemic>>.
- Sergiovanni, Thomas, *Building Community in Schools* (San Francisco, Josse-Bass Publishers, 1994).
- Villegas, Edberto, *Mula Tore Patungong Palengke: Neoliberal Education in the Philippines*, edited by Bienvenido Lumbera, Ramon Guillermo, and Arnold Alamon (Quezon City: IBON Foundation, 2007).
- Vostal, Filip, *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time* (United Kingdom: Palgrave, 2016).
- Welner, Galit, "The Zoom-bie Student and the Lecturer Reflections on Teaching and Learning with Zoom," <<http://www.spt.org/the-zoom-bie-student-and-the-lecturer-reflections-on-teaching-and-learning-with-zoom>>.
- Žižek, Slavoj, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020).

### Other Online Sources

- "College student commits suicide over arduous online classes," (26 January 2021), in <<https://www.dailyguardian.com.ph>>, 3 July 2021; cf. Tee M. L., Tee C. A., Anlacan J. P., Aligam K. J. G., Reyes P. W. C.,

Kuruchittham V., et al. (2020). Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. *Journal of Affective Disorder*, 277 (2020), <10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.043>

“Depression to suicide: India battles mental health crisis amid Covid-19,” (September 13, 2020), <[https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/stress-self-injuries-and-suicide-india-battles-mental-health-crisis-as-covid-tally-spikes-120091300331\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/stress-self-injuries-and-suicide-india-battles-mental-health-crisis-as-covid-tally-spikes-120091300331_1.html)>, 22 April 2021.

“Indonesia: Weak Public Health Response to Covid-19 Greater Efforts Spent on Law Undermining Labor, Environmental Rights,” (13 January 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/indonesia-weak-public-health-response-covid-19>), 7 June 2021.

“Years Don’t Wait for Them’: Increased Inequalities in Children’s Right to Education Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic,” (17 May 2021) <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/05/17/years-dont-wait-them/increased-inequalities-childrens-right-education-due-covid>>, 11 June 2021

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>>, 1 July 2021.

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/suicide-rate-by-country>>, 1 July 2021.