Algorithmic governmentality: radicalisation and immune strategy of capitalism and neoliberalism?

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Abstract

This article is a set of reflections on the question: 'what is completely new in algorithmic governmentality compared to capitalism and neoliberalism?' The following text is thus some preliminary, temporary and definitively uncertain intuitions in response to this question.

1. Algorithmic governmentality as symptom and accelerator of capitalism

If we keep as the definition of capitalism provided by Deleuze and Guattari as "the liberation of fluxes in a deterritorialised field",[1] the continuity between capitalism and algorithmic governmentality seems evident. Sophisticated processes of production of raw data (anonymisation, decontextualisation, deindexing and so on) correspond almost exactly to what Deleuze and Guattari called a process of decoding and deterritorialisation, that is, a production of expurgaged signals from everything that linked them to singular forms or experiences of life. Digitisation is also in this respect quite exemplary of what Bernard Stiegler, following Jacques Derrida and Sylvain Auroux, called 'grammatisation'.[2]

It seems also clear that, by encouraging new perspectives on the automatic and statistical apprehension of 'what bodies can do', the 'digital turn' is also closely complicit of a broader movement of becoming-management taking place in several sectors. The becoming-management privileges quantification (producing figures) over the elaboration of projects (producing meaning). Hence quantification becomes an end, a project in itself. Yet in the context of algorithmic governmentality, this quantification no longer presupposes norms of previous quantification, rather it seems to fuse with the (digital) world itself, to be a 'spontaneous' emergence.[3] 'Producing figures' for a profit by

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[1] "The decoding and the deterritorialization of flows define the very process of capitalism—that is, its essence, its tendency, and its external limit" (Deleuze & Guattari 1983: 320).

[2] See the article on 'grammatisation' on the Ars Industrialis website: http://arsindustrialis.org/grammatisation

[3] Algorithmic governmentality rests on the Big Data technical ideology (of exhaustivity, immanence, objectivity) that we will discuss further on.

all means, no matter the social consequences of what actually increases. In other words, even the modality of the work (or the project)[4] is liquefying in the profit of a mere circulation (of data, money, numbers) or a 'project' that no longer consists in avoiding the interruption of circulations. In fact, the 'project' is that of an acceleration of fluxes, a definitional acceleration of capitalism: the fact that flows are a-signifying is no longer a problem. On the contrary, by being a-signifying, it makes sure to avoid any form of subjectivation,[5] and producing a machinic, molecular and a-signifying subjection but one that is eminently operational.[6]

Thus, we could argue that digital 'raw' data are today the very 'texture' of capitalism (and an absolutely immaterial and abstract 'texture'). These are 'signals' – provoking reactions or stimuli in the computer systems – rather than 'signs' that lead to significations. Raw data do not lead themselves to being assimilated by categories of signs described by Charles-Sanders Peirce: there do not function as icons (that are signs by resembling an object), nor as indexes (that are signs by the physical connection to an object), nor symbols (that are signs by convention). But contrary to signals emitted by the animal kingdom – that are perhaps not more than raw digital data the result of a deliberative intention of the animal – raw data in themselves fulfil no function for the species: they operate, for example, by no territorial marking in destination to other specimens. Having said this, the capacities of rational beings, their *sapience* in surplus of their *sentience* – and their language powers in general – contribute to define what makes the specificity of human animals and what makes their humanity,[7] we have to admit that

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4   In *The Human Condition*, Arendt described the modality of the world: "To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication, which through this characteristic alone distinguishes itself from all other human activities…. the fabrication process, unlike action, is not irreversible: everything produced by human hands can be destroyed by them, and no use object is so urgently needed in the life process that its maker cannot survive and afford its destruction. *Homo faber* is indeed a lord and master, not only because he is the master or has set himself up as the master of all nature but because he is master of himself and his doings…. Alone with his image of the future product, *homo faber* is free to produce, and again facing alone the work of his hands, he is free to destroy" (Arendt 1958: 143-144).

5   "Whether we call it information society, cognitive capitalism or the access age, capitalism is defined ontologically as a 'liberation of fluxes in a deterritorialised field' (Deleuze and Guattari), that is as the abolition of any subject-substance and any object-substance: there are only subjective and objective punctualities, momentaneous breaks in the indefinite production of fluxes" (Neyrat 2011: 25).

6   "There is a molecular machinic unconscious that is made of coding systems, automatic systems, systems of molding, systems of borrowing and so on, that do not implement semiotic chains, nor subjectivising phenomena of subject/object relations, nor phenomena of consciousness. They implement instead what I call phenomena of machinic subjection [*phénomènes d'asservissement machinique*] in which functions and organs enter directly in interaction with machinic systems and semiotic systems. The example I always refer to is driving a car while day dreaming. Everything functions outside consciousness, all the reflexes, we think about something else, and even sometimes sleeping; and then there is a semiotic signal of awakening and suddenly, we come back to our consciousness, and reinject signifying chains. Such is the unconscious machinic subjection". Guattari 1980.

7   "Our power to be rational—and our discursive powers generally—helps to define what makes human animals special and, well, human. It accounts for our sapience and distinguishes us from the merely sentient". Pardo 2016.

in the algorithmic profiling, in reason of what it dispenses (the 'reflexive suspension', the necessary time of human evaluation and decision), affect us perhaps at a level more 'ontological' than what we would be ready to admit (in a time and intellectual milieu in which it has become tasteful to defy the good anthropo-logocentric humanism to the benefit of a vision of human being that is essentially technical). Maybe we could argue that, as a hypothesis, what these technical dispositifs 'deprive' us from is mainly our propensity to submit ourselves to the algorithmic rationality that is involved, that is, some possibilities and capacities of 'abstraction', 'distance' with the 'calculated real', but also 'anticipated' as we are and 'force-fed' by an increasingly 'smart' environment that is capable of being immediately, and even in advance, 'relevant' to us, to our ability of desiring and projecting; these capacities of imagination that are about to be outsourced to automatic machines.

At the same time, since signals "can be computed irrespective of their possible meaning",[8] it is as if signification was no longer absolutely necessary, and as if the universe was already here – independently from all interpretation – saturated with meaning, as if therefore, it was no longer necessary to relate to one another (to 'reterritorialise') via a signifying language.

Devices of algorithmic governmentality complete both the emancipation of signifiers in relation to signified (the numbering, the algorithmic recombination of profiles) and the substitution of signified to signifiers (the production of reality against [*à même*] the world – the only real that 'counts', for algorithmic governmentality, is the digital real, systematic quantitative representation replacing the systemic qualitative evaluation) realising from now a perfect form of capitalism in the sense in which Félix Guattari understood it:

> The whole fabric of the capitalist world consists of this kind of flux of de-territorialized signs – money and economic signs, signs of prestige and so on. Significations, social values (those one can interpret, that is) can be seen at the level of power formations, but, essentially, capitalism depends upon non-signifying machines. There is, for instance, no meaning in the ups and downs of the stock market; capitalist power, at the economic level, produces no special discourse of its own, but simply seeks to control the non-signifying semiotic machines, to manipulate the non-signifying cogs of the system. Capitalism gives each of us our particular role- doctor, child, teacher, man, woman, homosexual and it is up to us to adapt ourselves to the system of signification arranged for each of us. But at the level of real power, it is never this type of role that is a tissue; power does nor have to be identified with the director or the minister – it operates in relationships of finance and force, and among different pressure groups. A-signifying machines do not recognize agents, individuals, roles or even clearly defined objects. By this very fact they acquire a kind of omnipotence, moving across the signification systems within

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8   Eco 1976: 20, quoted in Genosko 2008.

which individual agents recognize and become alienated from one another. Capitalism has no visible beginning or end (Guattari 1984: 171-172).

Maurizio Lazzarato sums up really well the way a-signifying semiotics produce machinic subjection:

> If signifying semiotics have a function of subjective alienation, of "social subjugation", a-signifying semiotics have one of "machinic enslavement". A-signifying semiotics synchronize and modulate the pre-individual and pre-verbal elements of subjectivity by causing the affects, perceptions, emotions, etc. to function like component parts, like the elements in a machine (machinic enslavement). We can all function like the input/output elements in semiotic machines, like simple relays of television or the Internet that facilitate or block the transmission of information, communication or affects. Unlike signifying semiotics, a-signifying semiotics recognize neither persons, roles nor subjects. While subjection concerns the global person, those highly manipulable subjective, molar representations, "machinic enslavement connects infrapersonal, infrasocial elements thanks to a molecular economy of desire". The power of these semiotics resides in the fact that they permeate the systems of representation and signification by which "individuated subjects recognize each other and are alienated from each other".
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> Machinic enslavement is therefore not the same thing as social subjugation. If the latter appeals to the molar, individuated dimension of the subjectivity, the former activates its molecular, pre-individual, transindividual dimension. In the first case, the system speaks and generates speech; it indexes and folds the multiplicity of pre-signifying and symbolic semiotics over language, over linguistic chains by giving priority to its representative functions. In the second case, however, the system does not generate discourse: it does not speak but it functions, sets things in motion, by connecting directly to the "nervous system, the brain, the memory, etc." and activate the affective, transitivist, transindividual relations that are difficult to attribute to a subject, an individual, a me. (Lazzarato 2006)

2. Algorithmic governmentality as purification of neoliberalism

The processes of personalisation and profiling (at the detriment of approaches 'by pre-existing categories') specific to governmentality in the world of Big Data distinguish it fundamentally from hypotheses described by Michel Foucault on neoliberal 'biopower' as illustrations of Gary Becker's theses on 'human capital' for example. The algorithmic governmentality is no longer "a power that is exercised positively on life, to manage it, maximise it, to multiply it", "whose major role is to insure, to support, to reinforce, to multiply life" (Foucault 1998). Neither does it concern a 'biopolitics of populations' that would have emerged from the second half of the 18th century targeting human

multiplicities as "a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on" (Foucault 2003: 242-243). The 'data government' of course shares some characteristics with this biopower and biopolitics, especially in the crucial use of statistical practices, but the terrain of life – that of individuals as individual bodies and psyches, and that of populations that are affected by general processes peculiar to life – seems singularly deserted by algorithmic governmentality to the great benefit of a digital terrain that is increasingly self-enclosed, indifferent to the processes of emergence of life and the occurrence of death: algorithmic governmentality is absolutely indifferent to phenomena of wear and tear, the exhaustion of resources and ageing. Its temporality is that of the eternal present: a juxtaposition of successive 'nows'. It does not aim at governing 'autobiographical animals' (Derrida), 'mortals' (Arendt), that is living beings who are capable of suffering and called out as subjects of rights and duties, such as they would have to account for their acts and their decisions. Nor does it govern networks of aggregated data under the form of 'predictive' models, incarnating nothing other than pure potentiality, the economic opportunity that is detected in real-time. In other words, it aims at pure opportunity, one that is only finalised by the acceleration and the objectivation of the processes of decision themselves, that is, in terms of the automatisation of decisions.

Yet, algorithmic governmentality is not without 'producing' peculiar subjectivities: fragmented, the subject comes in the form of a myriad of data that link him or her to a multitude of profiles (as a consumer, a potential fraudster, a more or less trustable and productive employee and so on). All of them are related to him or her without inscribing him or her in any collective context (differently from the 'classical' modes of categorisation, such as the ethnic profiling, that were adjusted on socially proved categorisations and therefore susceptible to give rise to collective actions), the individual is also dispensed from giving an accounting to someone, becomes infinitely calculable, comparable, indexable, interchangeable and in concurrence. This is an absolute concurrence, that is no longer limited by or articulated with a single norm (based on merit, desirability, need, or equity). The individual is therefore left with everyone else at a quasi-molecular scale in an economy of reputation, risk and opportunity (rather than in an economy of project) operating in an automatised manner, at the subliminal scale of the infra-personal. We like to think of ourselves – individuals of the 21st century – as processes in constant, unlimited and unclosed evolution, and weakly defined, and this absence of definition makes room for the possibility of novelties; rather than finite and achieved beings, definitely ordered in a social status, with a profession and a category. This explains why we are keen to guarantee juridically, through the control of personal information for instance, "the freedom from unreasonable constraints on the construction of one's own identity"[9]. But also we want

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[9] "Control over personal information is control over an aspect of the identity one projects to the world, and the right to privacy is the freedom from unreasonable constraints on the construction of one's own

to protect ourselves against "the horror of have no shadow, nor any reflection, to be reduced to an absolutely white and dull existence, that has become porous and emptied of its substance…. The terrifying vision of being lightened of one's own weight of interior shadow, of this soft troubled fur that has doubled me [*me double*] in the inside and the outside of myself" (Foucault 1963). Clément Rosset remarked that in French, "a person, a particular human being, is also 'no one' [*personne*], no human being: there is an echo of the original link that welds the determined to the non-determined, something to whatever, the presence of a thousand paths to the absence of all paths" (Rosset 2004: 18-19). This double edge of the word 'person' in French reveals a dynamic ambivalence at the very heart of subjectivity, in the very principle of the process of subjectivation: a becoming-presence, the 'person' is unenclosable [*inclôturable*]. In the universe of mass data, through the tele-objectivity of 'predictive' profiling, it is in their double dimension of presence and absence, in their paradox or their constitutive fold[10] that persons disappear.

In conclusion, algorithmic governmentality would be both a radicalisation and an immune strategy of capitalism and neoliberalism that is 'purified' or 'expurgated' from everything that would bring it into 'crisis', that is, from anything that would interrupt and make it bifurcate: the world itself (replaced purely and simply by digital flows), life (in its untimeliness like birth, interruptiveness like death), subjects (capable of reticence – of not doing what they are capable of doing – and fabulation susceptible to bifurcate the course of things). That algorithmic governmentality (process of pure optimisation) is without world, without life, without subjects indicates that it is uninhabited and uninhabitable: it is because of this, and the imperative of safeguarding – for ourselves but also for everything that lives today and that will live tomorrow – an inhabitable world, that it matters to limit its extension.

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identity" (Agre & Rotenberg 1998 : 3).
[10] The reference is to Deleuze's *The Fold* (1992).

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