Plaine Commune, contributive learning territory

Maël Montévil

Abstract

The program Plaine Commune, contributive learning territory, started in late 2016. It emerged from the theoretical work of Bernard Stiegler and the Ars Industrialis group. The contributive economy is a strategy to disrupt technological disruption by developing knowledge in all its forms. This program has led to several concrete working groups in Plaine Commune, while others are still developing. Mainly, work is taking place on the economy, digital urbanism, and young children's development in the context of the overuse of digital media. Here, we focus on the group on digital media and young children's development and how academics and inhabitant works integrate.

Plaine Commune is the location of an experiment central to the book "Bifurquer"[1]. This experiment builds on earlier philosophical work by Bernard Stiegler and the Ars Industrialis Group that he co-founded. In this chapter, I describe some elements of the Plaine Commune experiment.

Plaine Commune is a group of nine towns of the northern greater Paris Area, in the Seine-Saint-Denis subregion (Département). This Parisian suburb has several striking features. The Basilique Saint-Denis is a prominent Christian place of worship since the mid 5th century, and it is also notably the grave of many French queens and kings. It became a heavily industrialized region in the mid-XIXth century and then part of the Parisian red belt, with a solid communist influence. Today, it is a mostly deindustrialized region and a low-income part of the greater Paris. It is also a landing point for many immigrants, notably from former french colonies. Part of the region managed to attract company headquarters and large infrastructures like the Stade de France (the largest stadium in the greater Paris area); however, these efforts struggle to integrate with the inhabitants. Plaine Commune, and more generally Seine-Saint-Denis, combine a young and creative population with difficulties stemming from unemployment, poverty, and urban landlock.

The president of the Plaine Commune local authority, Patrick Braouezec, has been following the work of Bernard Stiegler and the Ars Industrialis group for several years when he asked to launch an experiment in Plaine Commune. The main aim was to test a contributive income in Plaine Commune, with a method of contributory research and a call for research projects was launched in 2017. In a nutshell, contributive income would be a new regimen where people are employed for a part of the year and paid to develop their knowledge for another part of the year. In a sense, this kind of status already exists in France,

1   B. Stiegler et al. *Bifurquer: Il n'y a pas d'alternative*. Les liens qui libèrent, June 2020. ISBN: 9791020908575. URL: http://www.editionslesliensquiliberent.fr/livre-Bifurquer-609-1-1-0-1.html.

but only for live artists, called "intermittents du spectacle". Contributive income could apply to any activity and takes place in a specific setup.

The rationale for developing this regimen is severalfold. First, automation brings about the trend of a decrease in employment. Even putting aside the corresponding social disasters, a decline in employment leads to a contradiction in consumer capitalism since mass consumption is required to sustain the system — and debt can only go so far to patch this discrepancy. Second, automation has intrinsic limitations. In Stiegler's work, automation is powerful and sometimes even necessary, from the automatisms of an actor playing a role on stage to the automation of a production chain or even to biology. Still, automation also needs to be coupled with means for deautomation - the ability to opt out of the automatism when it goes wrong or could be better in a given context. The computational optimizations in the current economic paradigm tend to neglect this dimension of human activity with dire consequences. Third, Stiegler and Ars Industrialis investigated the role of the time free of productive constraints *otium* , in Latin, by contrast with *negotium* – the Ars Industrialis unofficial, initial name was *otium* . In particular, Stiegler emphasized the significance of the amateur figure in all domains, from art to technology[2]. The conclusion is that, in a specific sense, work is mostly performed outside employment. In other words, employment tends to destroy work because it tends to collapse on the synchronized dimension of human activity, focusing on optimality criteria in current management[3].

A central reference of this program is the economist Amartya Sen. He noticed that the life expectancy in Harlem was lower than in Bangladesh during a famine, at least for men – death in childbirth cripple womens' statistics. Amartya Sen understood this remarkable difference with the concept of capacities: practical knowledge and the material situation enabling inhabitants to mobilize them. Bernard Stiegler built on this concept in conjunction with the concept of proletarianization in Karl Marx's work. Proletarianization is the loss of knowledge that tends to follow the transfer of this knowledge into a technical device, starting with assembly lines by contrast with craftsmanship – the relevant change during Karl Marx's time. Today, proletarianization is not limited to production; it has entered everyday life, via consumer capitalism, and social life, via smartphones and social networks of many kinds. Following the development of digital technologies, proletarianization takes place at an increasing pace. At the same time, this accelerated technological development leads to disruption, a situation where societies are no longer able to own their technologies through new knowledge, sciences, regulations, and law[4]. This situation cannot last since it leads to an increase in entropies, from the perspective of physics, biology and society — for the latter knowledge is precisely what can delay entropy increase somewhat like biological organizations and normativity do in living beings[5].

In this context, the overarching aim of the contributive economy, specifically of the Plaine

2 Bernard Stiegler. "Le temps de l'amatorat". In: *entretien avec Éric Foucault, Alliage* 69 (2011), pp. 161–179.

3 Bernard Stiegler. "Work as the Struggle against Entropy in the Anthropocene". In: *No Sweat, Harvard Design Magazine* 46 (), p. 177. URL: http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/46.

4 Bernard Stiegler. *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781509529278.

5 Bernard Stiegler. *The neganthropocene*. Open Humanites Press, 2018; Maël Montévil. "Sciences et entropocène. Autour de Qu'appelle-t-on panser ? de Bernard Stiegler". In: *EcoRev'* 50.1 (Mar. 2021), pp. 109–125. DOI: 10.3917/ecorev.050.0109. URL: https://montevil.org/publications/articles/2021-Montevil-Stiegler-Sciences-Entropocene/.

Commune program, is to develop a dynamic of capacitation, whereby new technologies can be adopted critically and transformed when needed. As suggested by the above discussion, this goal implies and, in a sense, means overcoming both the result of a long process of proletarianization and the undergoing disruption. To this end, it is insufficient to build on spontaneous self-organization both because of the previous loss of knowledge and the pace of technological changes. Instead, capacitation requires establishing a new relationship between academics, professionals, and inhabitants. The aim is to create groups where inhabitants bring their experience and academics bring formalized knowledge, albeit knowing that this knowledge is insufficient to understand and take care of the local situations encountered. Then, the group works as a research collective aiming to produce both practical and theoretical knowledge on the question of interest. Of course, there are differences in the position of the different actors of the group; nevertheless, all actors face the disruption and take a research stance to face the more specific questions they are confronted with.

In Plaine Commune, several questions are investigated with this method.

- The contributive Clinic, on the use of digital media and young children parenting. The underlying question of this work is epiphylogenesis and its disruption. This work is detailed below.

- Digital Urbanity by gaming (*Urbanité numérique en jeux*), to develop a new use of digital technologies to address urban changes and the relationship between urbanity and inhabitants in the context of the forthcoming Olympic games (2024). In practice, this work uses Minetest, a free software game similar to Minecraft, as an interface to do urban modeling in middle and high schools. This program is in partnership with Éducation Nationale (Académie de Créteil), urbanists (O'zone), and sport federations and associations, among others. The aim is for inhabitants to take ownership of their urban milieu, and at the same time to jump-start a culture of working with digital modeling for concrete questions. This project takes place in the context of the forthcoming Olympic Games in Paris (most infrastructures are not being built in Paris proper but in the Seine-Saint-Denis suburb), and a typical challenge of infrastructures constructed for this purpose is their future urbanistic role. The work articulates several groups: i) the core, transdisciplinary group (with teachers, informaticians, urbanists, architects), ii) teachers committed to implementing this project in their school and who underwent a specific training organized by the project, and, of course, iii) schoolchildren participating in the project. The underlying philosophical question is that of the meaning of urbanity, and to this end, Bernard Stiegler reworked the concept of "the right to the city" (*droit à la ville*) of the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, a concept that has traction in local politics.

- Contributive economy, to prepare the institutional framework to organize contributive income and assess its economic benefits. A critical underlying philosophical question for this group is to integrate the calculable and the incalculable in investment decisions, by contrast with the ideology that only calculable processes matter in financial investment as well as in management (even in academia, based on bibliometrics). As of now, this group is primarily theoretical, with the participation of academics and professionals. In particular, it organizes a seminar in the Caisse des Dépots, a French public investment bank.

Several other projects are in incubation. Indeed, the emergence of such projects is a complex and lengthy process since it requires both an academic interest in the specialties required, the involvement of public or private institutions, the interest of inhabitants, and

adequate funding. Emerging projects include working on gastronomy sensu Brillat-Savarin, that is to say, on everything concerning humans insofar as they feed themselves, from recipes to geography[6]. A central underlying question is the one of taste, especially by building on Nietzsche. Another project targets the conversion of combustion engine cars into electric cars by building on advanced practical knowledge on mechanics that local "street mechanics" possess.

Bernard Stiegler's perspective on these projects was not just to consider them individually - this would be reiterating a complete division of labor, a kind of functional insolation *sensu* Shaj Mohan and Divya Dwivedi, [7]and this organization leads to artificial stupidity and proletarianization. Instead, he was working to reticulate these different projects, notably under the umbrella of the question of generations and of that which is transgenerational.

To conclude this chapter, I will provide more details on the first of these projects addressing the transgenerational, namely the contributive clinic mentioned above. This project builds on previous work by Bernard Stiegler on epiphylogenesis and, particularly, on attention. In the Plaine Commune program, it was a critical question to address, and Bernard Stiegler started to investigate how with Anne Alombert, as a new approach of psychotherapy in the context of the disruption. On the basis of earlier work [8]and the publicity of the Plaine-Commune program, Bernard Stiegler was contacted by Marie-Claude Bossière, a child psychiatrist (*p é dopsychiatre* , in the singular french tradition that emerged after World War II) who is part of a group of clinicians alerting on the overuse of digital media by young children and more generally by the problems of young children parenting once smartphones and tablets entered everyday life[9]. I was also joining the Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation (IRI) at the time, bringing the question of entropy from the perspective of biological organizations and their disruptions, notably with the concept of anti-entropy to accommodate organization from both a systemic and diachronic perspective[10]. Anne Alombert was in charge of the methodological and philosophical aspects of this project, which were focusing on the role of technical supports in psychological or noetic activities[11].

After discussions with several actors of the Plaine Commune territory and exploring different institutional possibilities, the project focused on working with a PMI (Protection Maternelle et Infantile, i.e., center for protecting young children and mothers). PMIs are public medical centers following children from 0 to 6 years old, focusing on prevention and advising parents. In late 2018, the services of Saint-Denis diffused our call for collective work and the PMI Pierre Semard, located in one of the poorest parts of Saint-Denis, answered positively to this call. We organized work in progressive steps. The first step was only with

6   Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. *The physiology of taste: or meditations on transcendental gastronomy*. Vintage, 2009.
7   Divya Dwivedi. "Through the Great Isolation: Sans-colonial". In: *Philosophy World Democracy*(2020). URL: https://www.philosophy-world-democracy.org/through-the-great-isolation.
8   Bernard Stiegler. *Taking care of youth and the generations*. Stanford University Press, 2010.
9   Daniel Marcelli, Marie-Claude Bossière, and Anne-Lise Ducanda. "Plaidoyer pour un nouveau syndrome « Exposition précoce et excessive aux écrans » (EPEE)". In: *Enfances & Psy*79.3 (2018), pp. 142–160. DOI: 10.3917/ep.079.0142. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-enfances-et-psy-2018-3-page-142.htm.
10   Maël Montévil. "Entropies and the Anthropocene crisis". In: *AI and society*(May 2021). DOI: 10.1007/s00146-021-01221-0. URL: https://montevil.org/publications/articles/2021-Montevil-Entropies-Anthropocene/.
11   Anne Alombert. "Faire du choc une chance ?" In: *Zone critique*(2020). URL: https://zone-critique.com/2020/05/01/faire-choc-chance/.

the professionals of the PMI, then parents who were former patients and overcome screen overuse problems of Marie-Claude Bossière joined the group. Last, the group opened to parents of the neighborhood.

Bernard Stiegler's stance with professionals and parents was that, in the current situations of rapidly changing technologies of smartphones and tablets, we are all lost both when aiming to take care of young children and for our own work and everyday life. In this sense, the academics are not just bringing in scientific knowledge; they also contribute with their own experience and difficulties. Reciprocally, parents and professionals can build on academic knowledge to understand the challenges they are facing and contribute to ongoing academic research. In this sense, the group actors are primarily in symmetric positions, facing similar problems, lacking sufficient knowledge to address them, with complementary asymmetries due to different knowledge, experience and duties. For example, and to be blunt, Bernard Stiegler had obviously a lot to bring concerning concepts in general and the relationship between technics and noesis in particular; however, he was also under the authority of Marie-Claude Bossière concerning the therapeutic device and of the professionals and parents concerning the local situation.

This work was organized by articulating two groups: the PMI group and the group following an academic seminar monthly in IRI, primarily academics and external psychologists. In order to integrate academic research and the PMI group's research, the seminar was followed by restitution to the PMI group. The seminar built on texts that can contribute to understanding the question of young children's development and their disruptions, as well as the therapeutic device that was being co-constructed. This arrangement enabled us to work on challenging texts since the beginning of this work, for example, by Bateson[12], that the PMI group could and actually did systematically read. In these meetings, Bernard Stiegler worked chiefly as a philosopher, introducing concepts and working on them by building on the texts. In a nutshell, the proposal of Bernard Stiegler to the professionals and parents was to contribute as researchers, and the group took it seriously. The configuration of the seminar has changed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemics, professionals of the PMI desired to follow the academic seminar directly, and the shift to videoconference activities was a chance to overcome practical difficulties to this end.

The integration of parents to the PMI group and its work used a specific device: the use of relatively short videos to serve as a basis for discussions. The videos used can be found on a dedicated website[13]. Afterward, the meetings combined both the insights of practitioners and parents and scientific and philosophical input. The use of the videos in the therapeutic device exemplifies the pharmacological perspective on technologies: screens and digital media are both remedies and poisons, and there is, therefore, no contradiction to use screens to address issues created by screens. The PMI professionals have made the concept of pharmakon their own and used it in their prevention work when discussing with parents who are not part of the group. This perspective on technology was also significant in the COVID-19 confinements, where work was done by videoconference. Indeed, instead of stopping activities during the first confinement, the group chose to double the frequency of the meetings, from one every

---

12 Gregory Bateson. "The cybernetics of "self": A theory of alcoholism". In: *Psychiatry* 34.1 (1971), pp. 1–18.

13 IRI. *Website of the atelier contributif on screens and young children*. 2021. URL: https://atelierecrans.wordpress.com/.

two weeks to one per week. In this period, the paradigm of institutional psychotherapy, where patients take care of the institution, has been critical.

In the context of COVID-19, after the death of Bernard Stiegler, the group has faced hardships; however, it still holds strong. In particular, it is now working on the diffusion of its knowledge to other professionals and parents in Saint-Denis and neighboring towns. Indeed, one aim of Bernard Stiegler was to recreate a *philia* in the industrialized economy, and it was particularly successful in this case.

References

Alombert, A. (2020). Faire du choc une chance ? *Zone critique*. https://zone-critique.com/2020/05/01/faire-choc-chance/

Bateson, G. (1971). The cybernetics of "self": A theory of alcoholism. *Psychiatry*, *34*(1), 1–18.

Brillat-Savarin, J. A. (2009). *The physiology of taste: Or meditations on transcendental gastronomy*. Vintage.

Dwivedi, D. (2020). Through the great isolation: Sans-colonial. *Philosophy World Democracy*. https://www.philosophy-world-democracy.org/through-the-great-isolation

IRI. (2021). Website of the atelier contributif on screens and young children. https://atelierecrans.wordpress.com/

Marcelli, D., Bossière, M.-C., & Ducanda, A.-L. (2018). Plaidoyer pour un nouveau syndrome « exposition précoce et excessive aux écrans » (epee). *Enfances & Psy*, *79*(3), 142–160. https://doi.org/10.3917/ep.079.0142

Montévil, M. (2021a). Sciences et entropocène. autour de qu'appelle-t-on panser ? de bernard stiegler. *EcoRev'*, *50*(1), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.3917/ecorev.050.0109

Montévil, M. (2021b). Entropies and the anthropocene crisis. *AI and society*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-021-01221-0

Stiegler, B., Collectif Internation, Clezio, J., & Supiot, A. (2020). *Bifurquer: Il n'y a pas d'alternative*. Les liens qui libèrent. http://www.editionslesliensquiliberent.fr/livre-Bifurquer-609-1-1-0-1.html

Stiegler, B. (n.d.). Work as the struggle against entropy in the anthropocene. *No Sweat, Harvard Design Magazine*, *46*, 177. http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/46

Stiegler, B. (2010). *Taking care of youth and the generations*. Stanford University Press.

Stiegler, B. (2011). Le temps de l'amatorat. *entretien avec Éric Foucault, Alliage*, (69), 161–179.

Stiegler, B. (2018). *The neganthropocene*. Open Humanites Press.

Stiegler, B. (2019). *The age of disruption: Technology and madness in computational capitalism*. Polity Press.