

Bernard Stiegler: Friendship and Fellowship

When I first met Bernard Stiegler, he was starting his program in *Plaine Commune*, a suburb of Paris that mixes misery of all kinds with young and creative vitality. He introduced me to this undertaking that aimed to experiment with the contributive economy. The contributive economy is inspired both by free software, where programmers, in a sense, do their best work outside employment, and the specific status of french live arts workers, who are paid outside employment to compensate for the instability of their income but also and crucially here, to hone their skills. Thus, in a nutshell, the contributive economy introduces funded intermittent periods of work without the constraints of employment to recreate a kind of *otium* or leisure, which is the opposite of *negotium*, that is to say, business. These periods outside employment are not just free of constraints; they also need support, collective organization, and academic inputs.

Contributive economy and developing a contributive income requires rethinking economy, accounting, investment, work, knowledge, and the relationship between Academia and society, all to recreate the collective ability to bifurcate as we face the critical challenges of the Anthropocene. What does it mean to bifurcate? The mathematical meaning is the same in English and in French, but in french, the word is more common than in English. It also means to fork, to change path. Bernard was not referring mainly to the mathematical meaning – in the latter, the branch followed is indifferent, whereas for Bernard, the critical notion was that bifurcations are negentropic. Indeed, the concept of entropy and negentropy were central to his approach, both at the theoretical and epistemological levels. Since I worked before on the related concept of anti-entropy in biology, he proposed that I join this stimulating undertaking. At the same time, Bernard told me that he did not expect me to work full-time on this program. One of the reasons was that its financial means were limited, but a deeper one was foundational to our relationship, namely his kind recognition of my walking my intellectual path and his gentle intention to cultivate this while we worked together, and his philosophy opened new horizons for me.

In an endeavor like the Plaine Commune program, shaped by the philosophy of Bernard Stiegler, there is fellowship. Such a program is an adventure, with extraordinary moments like the Serpentine Gallery Work Marathon event, where I first met Shaj Mohan and Divya Dwivedi, who were introduced to the group as friends and collaborators of Jean-Luc Nancy (Bernard, Divya and Shaj would later organize with Nancy the conference series on Evil). In fellowship, a common goal and structuring concepts unite contributors, and the person of Bernard Stiegler also played a central role. The fellowship possesses its joys and complicity. But, there is also a tension between fellowship and

friendship since the latter requires the mutual recognition of each other walking his own path. This tension led several philosophers, who had some sort of friendship, not to work together and to, at best, refer distantly to each other's works.

In our case, though, there was another facilitating element for this improbable combination. Working together went with transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity was the way Bernard Stiegler strived to overcome the almost impossibility, in the current time, of the polymaths of old¹. Overcoming this impossibility is central to preserving our ability to think things together, that is to say, to tame the shortcomings of specialization – a kind of proletarianization that is growing even in Academia, even in philosophy. In a transdisciplinary setting, intellectual relationships cannot be simply hierarchical or symmetric but are straightforwardly complementary, at least when there is a sufficient mutual understanding. Those were facilitating conditions, but, again, it was primarily Bernard's generosity and acknowledgment that enabled our relationship to include friendship, and friendship is more profound than fellowship.

Now, fellowship and friendship also meet when there is something like a common path to walk together. In our case, we met on the paths of (ex-)organology for Bernard and the theorization of biological organizations for me. In a nutshell, Bernard Stiegler's general organology aims to understand the technical form of life (Canguilhem) as a process of individuation (Simondon) where technical objects are *pharmaka* (Plato, Derrida) and the traces for tertiary retentions (Husserl, Stiegler). For me, living beings sustain themselves far from thermodynamic equilibrium (Boltzman, Prigogine) by interdependent constraints forming a whole (Kant, Canguilhem, Kauffman) constituted and constituting themselves historically (Darwin, Bergson, Heidegger), which is why theoretical biology is in contrast with physics and its mathematical writing (Newton, Einstein, Bailly, Longo). But, of course, these names and characterizations are just samples and hints to something that was an open process, and the ramifications in both cases are not regional.

These paths were different but strongly resonated, and they influenced each other. In some cases, the differences created some weirdness; for example, before we met, Bernard hijacked the term negentropy to conceptualize something different from its initial meaning in physics, and instead to conceive something proper to the living. Independently, in the group where I did my Ph.D., Francis Bailly and Giuseppe Longo, and myself later, the strategy was to coin a new term, anti-entropy, to manifest this difference between physics and biology. Bernard was already interested in the similarity of perspectives, but, in my work, I emphasized historicity as an intrinsic property of anti-entropy for various reasons, some of them being technical (mathematical and epistemological). Bernard then adopted the concept of anti-entropy as something different from negentropy and complementary to

¹ See Shaj Mohan "A Good Night for Long Walks", in this anthology.

it ... even though, for me, anti-entropy is a further specification of his concept of negentropy that conveys some nuances. The problem lies in the distinction between the inert and the living and the objectivation of anti-entropy in the latter. In the inert, Prigogine's dissipative structures and similar situations are the spontaneous self-organization of flows whose structure maintains a low entropy (physics' negentropy, if any). On the other side, biological organizations use flows but can endure only because they are the singular result of history (evolution, but also development); this is anti-entropy.

Bernard's use of anti-entropy corresponds more to something that I call anti-entropy production, a companion concept to anti-entropy like entropy production is a companion concept to entropy. Entropy production is the irreversible increase of entropy in a system, thus an increase that does not result from flows, and it is the underlying concept in physics' definition of the time arrow; that is, the reason we can distinguish a film that is played forward and backward. Entropy production means that the system goes towards more generic configurations. Similarly, anti-entropy production defines a time arrow, but instead of situations becoming more and more generic, it corresponds to situations that become more and more singular and, again, endure because of this. Since these questions are still under heavy work, translations between our vocabularies may continue to change.

Moreover, we were both deeply interested and concerned with epistemology, though Bernard's scope was broader than mine, as he was searching for a fundamentally new way of knowing without the problems of the subject. I was focused on sciences while he was primarily concerned with the role of technics and technology in knowledge, notably proletarianization, the loss of knowledge when the latter is transferred to a technological device, and denoetization, the loss of the ability to think. These concepts and questions propagate in my theoretical biology networks like wildfire. And, of course, the critical question was and remains how to overcome these processes.

In Academia, even in philosophy, the ability to think and thus to take care of a world under a diversity of disruptions is weakened at best. I mentioned how gentle and considerate Bernard was, but, at the same time, he also could be harsh with his words when facing the lack of thinking - using language that was fairly distinct from the polished and collectively complacent habitus of Academia, especially in humanities. For example, he was commonly criticizing "Les petits derridiens" (the little derridians), who, in a sense, are repeating Derrida's conclusions without taking into account his stakes, as if deconstructed oppositions became dead, as if deconstruction reduced to an automatism was the end of philosophy. To Bernard, the little derridians were genuinely betraying Derrida by repeating him without philosophy. By contrast, in a sense, it seemed that the ghost of Derrida was the most present to Bernard when he was debating with him.

Now, there was also impatience in his criticisms when confronted with the lack of thinking, and part of this impatience was driven by the stakes of our epoch. It was not limited to the little derridians or even to philosophers; it existed for people in a diversity of positions, professional, administrative, scientific, intellectual, who would complacently follow the automatism of their position while losing sight of the aims and meaning of this position and beyond - a kind of evil.

On the opposite, a project in the Plaine Commune program was particularly significant for Bernard. This work took place and still takes place in a preventive healthcare institution of Saint-Denis, the PMI Pierre Semard. It focuses on the disruption of infants' neurological and psychological development by screens, primarily those of digital media. It was not a question of imposing protocols or prescriptions but of nurturing a collective's thinking by taking the inhabitants and professionals seriously, their experience, their capacity to assimilate knowledge, and finally, to forge new knowledge and abilities collectively. One of his pursuits was for engineers and designers of high-tech companies to be compelled to consult the group's knowledge for future technological designs.

This group also had a specific dimension of mutual care. Part of it was formalized as the psychotherapeutic dimension of the project. But, another part was the creation of a *philia* between participants that came from very different worlds, and that was also Bernard Stiegler's aim. Bernard found energy in this mutual care, both when he was taking care of the participants, primarily through philosophy, and when the group took care of him in one way or another. For instance, one day, he had some stitches to get removed due to a bad fall, and nurses of the PMI proposed handling them instead of him wasting time with a specific appointment elsewhere. So they went into one of the caring rooms, Bernard happily endorsing the role of the worried patient and the nurses accommodating him while debating the best way to remove the stitches.

His disappearance leaves us with many wounds to stitch regarding the Anthropocene in general and philosophy in particular. For Bernard's tremendous efforts not to waste, and as loyalty, the future requires that we criticize him carefully, show the limits of his thinking, and open new ways capitalizing on his work.