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Bernard Stiegler

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For Marc Crépon

The Magic Skin; or, The Franco-European Accident of Philosophy after Jacques Derrida

BERNARD STIEGLER

He strode boldly into the room, where the sound of gold exerted a blinding fascination over his senses, frozen in sheer greed. The young man was probably motivated by the most logical of all the eloquent sentences of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose dour thought, I believe, is as follows: *Yes, I can understand how a man would go for broke at the gambling table, but only when, between himself and death, he sees nothing more than his last penny.*

. . . A man exhausts himself in two instinctively-accomplished actions that dry up the wellsprings of his existence. Two verbs express all the forms that these two causes of death can assume: to WILL ONESELF and to EMPOWER ONESELF (VOULOIR ET POUVOIR). Between these two ends of human activity, there is another formula used by wise men, to which I owe my happiness and my long life. *Willing ourselves* consumes us, and *empowering ourselves* destroys us, but KNOWING OURSELVES leaves our weak organisation in a perpetual state of calm. Thus desire and the will are dead in me, slain by thought. . . .

Yes indeed, I wish to live in excess, said the stranger, picking up the magic skin.

Honoré de Balzac, La Peau de chagrin

"It was the counterfeit coin," he calmly replied as though to justify himself for his prodigality.

. . . "Yes, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for."

. . . To be mean is never excusable, but there is some merit in knowing that one is; the most irreparable of vices is to do evil out of stupidity.

Charles Baudelaire, "La fausse monnaie," *Le Spleen de Paris*

The difference is precisely that of *the excessive*. An essential exaggeration marks this process. Exaggeration cannot be here a feature among others, still less a secondary feature. The problem of the gift has to do with its nature which is *excessive in advance, a priori exaggerated*. A donating experience that would not be delivered over, *a priori*, to some immoderation, in other words, a moderate, measured gift would not be a gift. To give and thus do something other than calculate its return in exchange, the most modest gift must pass beyond measure.

Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps, vol. 1: La fausse monnaie*

Philosophy, at the end of the twentieth century, *is not* French. There is, of course, something called French philosophy. There is, evidently, a French history of philosophy, and it seems clear that, at least as the second half of the twentieth century is concerned, philosophy passes into France, or in any case more or less takes passes through France—but it always maintains its relation to Germany and the Germanic countries, to Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl, and in particular Wittgenstein and Heidegger, who are the main interlocutors of the French.

The combination of circumstances leading to the fact of philosophy's having traversed these roads certainly ought to be examined. In any case, this fact is an accident. Philosophy is not French: its "French" character remains, for me, an accident—a European accident.

If one must philosophize *by accident* rather than *by essence*, I wish to emphasize *here* that the "French" accident certainly counts, but the importance must not be overestimated; nor should it be forgotten that this French era is shot through with Germany and

Austria, and that, lastly and most importantly, if philosophy can be accidentally French, this is because it is historically and intrinsically *European*. What *makes* Europe—that is philosophy. In saying this I do not mean to imply that what makes philosophy could be Europe. The question concerns *the European accident* and, nevertheless, its necessity . . . but *in delayed action*.

Philosophy is European in an intrinsic way, and it could definitely be said, precisely in the European tradition of the term, “in an essential way.” But I will not say this, and this non-use of the term *essential* or of any reference to *being* also means, in this case, that *philosophy is henceforth called upon to become global, alongside the technology that has left Europe* to expand across all the other continents—a development contemplated by Valéry. *For the European necessity of philosophy is techno-logical*. Which is to say, hypomnesic. And accidental *precisely* in this respect.

And the future of philosophy *comes to pass through this*.

In short, Europe is called to a global becoming (to exist on a global scale) *with its philosophy—failing which it will die*—and can become so only by “de-Europeanizing” itself. It will no longer remain in this world to come, it will have no future in other words, unless it is able *to turn its philosophy into something global*, and thereby stamp thought with the *intrinsically accidental* character of thought—and, furthermore, with the intrinsically *non-European* character of Europe and its future.¹



Accidental, then, means techno-logical here. And this is what can be thought from out of Husserl, and from the reading of him Derrida attempts on the basis of the question of geometry.

Husserl describes and inscribes *The Crisis of the European Sciences* because philosophy is, in his view, intrinsically European. And because Europe is philosophical, it is possible for Catherine II of Russia and Voltaire to exchange letters. European philosophy and the Republic of Letters, that is, the political project inhering in philosophy—and singularly in the Enlightenment moment—whether it be English, Belgian, Italian, German, French, Flemish, Spanish, Czech, Austrian, or something else, occurs within the Eu-

ropean horizon. Consequently, Europe is therefore in this, that is, accidentally and nevertheless necessarily, we could say supplementarily and as supplement at or of the origin (*comme supplément d'origine*), *the site of philosophy*.

Clearly, the question of philosophy plays itself out in France in a singular manner, owing to the very fact that the French Revolution is one of the great subjects for Kant and Hegel, through its interpretation as well as its consequences for France and Europe, but also through its institutions (the *École Normale Supérieure*, for example, or many other elements constitutive of the European idea of reason, such as the museum). All of this makes for a *French moment* in the European question at the heart of philosophy. Yet it is nothing but a moment, above all a moment *of Europe*: the French Revolution is a European, not only a French, event.

This is why the question I was asked, following Derrida's death and the referendum on the European constitution—the question of whether French philosophy will be able to function, work, and survive in a politically unified Europe to come (if this will ever be)—is in a way absurd. I understand the question . . . but I detect some suspicion in it, as if, for example, “French philosophers” were suspected of *fearing* the Europeanization of Europe. “French philosophers” do not fear the Europeanization of Europe. Among “French philosophers,” I, for one, assuming I am both a philosopher and French, fear the *destruction* of Europe by what gets called “the European expansion” or the “European constitution,” *and called by these names without ever calling out to philosophical thought, that is European thought, to participate in this construction and this constitution*.

We—and in this *we* I believe I can also speak in the name of certain philosopher friends who voted yes to the constitution because they thought it best to vote for it despite everything I have been saying here, and these friends are as concerned as I am about the loss of the philosophical memory of Europe in this project that is now a failure—we, then, who voted both yes and no to this French referendum on the European constitution on May 29, 2006, we do not fear the Europeanization and the philosophical future of Europe and the world in the least. On the contrary, we desire it.

Because in the end, well beyond these questions, what is at stake is not so much philosophy and Europe: at stake is philosophy and the world, that is, philosophy and *the real*.

The real . . . come again?!

The real, apprehended *as a process of psychical and collective individuation*, is what is at stake here. The work to come, for we philosophers-to-come, lies in describing what will transpire globally *in terms of individuation*, whether this will be the individuation of geometry, the individuation of art, the individuation of physics, the individuation of the living, the individuation of nations, technological individuation, or psychical individuation in the Freudian sense. This all comes under the heading of a process of individuation that is at once psychical, collective, and technical, and that continues to expand endlessly—and the as-yet unrecognized major figure in all this is Gilbert Simondon, with whom we are only beginning to be able to think how and why psychical individuation only occurs as collective individuation and vice versa.

But the question, then, also concerns why contemporary capitalism makes this individuation literally impossible, and why we will have to invent another capitalism, that is, *undertake the revolution of capitalism*.

How is this becoming about the future? That is the question, and it is the question of reason, but I understand “reason” in a totally new sense, although this new sense is *propped up* by its former sense (*ratio*), in the sense that Freud says that desire is propped up by the drives: *it is something other, but it is made of that which is the other*. Reason is essentially a relation to the future. Reason, in French, is the motif, the motive force (*motif*), what impels movement and drives: it is thus desire. This equivalence of reason and motif cannot be heard in English or German languages. The relation between reason and motif, that is, between *logos* and desire, which is the very basis of the relation between the noetic soul and *theos* in Aristotle’s treatise *On the Soul*, is what Hegel intuited quite well following Spinoza, who himself owed it to Aristotle.

Reasoning this way, however, is quite intimidating and risky in the wake of the death of Jacques Derrida, when he is no lon-

ger there to object, that is, to deconstruct, and stand guard as the watchman he will always have been—and always against himself.



Jacques Derrida is dead, even if he still lives and will remain alive in the way he always was: as a ghost. He essentially thought life as life-death, as *revenance*, and as that which consists in not opposing the living and the dead. Derrida is dead. And Jacques Derrida dead is unfortunately not Jacques Derrida living. . . . But must we hold to the empirical fact of his death in order to truly question what it entails for philosophy? There is no doubt that this empirical death changes things, above all this: we will no longer be able to speak with Jacques Derrida. But then, I never really spoke with him—even though I was fortunate enough to often listen to him. Our oral exchanges were seldom useful, except perhaps the very last one, which took place in Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro, in August 2004.

Death is an accident, and accidents are what count more than anything in philosophy. Although death is, if I may dare say, the prototypical accident, it must not be thought from within an *opposition* between the living and the dead: this is what Derrida taught to the death—even to the very instant of his dying, writing it, until the end, as his life.

If there is, after the death of Derrida, a possibility of philosophy in France, of a novel, unheard-of philosophy, its necessity will lie in what exceeds and overflows that which, in this accident, can be reduced to what opposes life and death: it will be, in one way or another, the return (*revenance*) of Derrida, against himself no doubt, for the return of a philosophy is always what comes from within it as *its* other and, to this extent, as the other.

Will there be philosophers *like* Derrida after Derrida? I would be inclined to say no. Is this even the right kind of question to ask? I am not certain. In Kant, who is the great philosophical model of the European tradition, we see the figure of the philosopher belonging to an epoch that will never again take place, and those who try to rehash it will be *annulled*. There will never again be philosophers the likes of Kant. *And all the better!* As for French philosophy today, I do not know what to make of it. Am I my-

self an interesting French philosopher? Obviously I would tend to think so; it would be pathetic if I thought otherwise. But I don't know what is to be thought of French philosophy today. It certainly does not resemble the French philosophy of the 1950s to the 1970s; those were indisputably exceptional years, but we must not try to duplicate the allure of their style and craft (*facture*): we would find ourselves transformed into clever monkeys, aping along in a sideshow.

On the other hand, it would be interesting to revisit what occurred in the course of that period. It has to be explained or, rather, rendered more complex; we need to go back and dig up the axioms of those years (*déterrer*). The philosophies passing by way of France between 1950 and 1970 and then through this other, more complex period that leads up to Derrida's death were extremely fruitful; but they also uncovered a proliferation of impasses. The grandeur of this era of philosophy, which indeed played itself out largely in France, was linked, as with all things human, to its finitude, and the future of the philosophy to come, should we have the strength for it, will depend on its capacity to understand that finitude without letting it lead to a loss of memory. On the contrary, it will involve anamnesis—but as a novel reflection on hypomnesis.

The philosophy to come can only come from a critical return to its past: this has always been the case, despite appearances to the contrary, and there is no reason to expect this to change: Hegel became Hegel through enunciating the questions, difficulties, and impasses of Kant, who did so with Wolff's, just as Leibniz did against Descartes, and so on. This has been, is, and always will be the case, as long as we have a future.

This task of philosophy, brought now into today's world, is, however, to rethink capitalism, that is, to rearticulate Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. This articulation was an old topos of the 1960s, and sounds a bit "May '68." But in fact I believe that this is just the point, and that, precisely in *passing through 1968*, something is obstructed and goes missing. What becomes unthought is technics, and industry. What has not been broached today, remaining a task for the future, is a reading of Nietzsche from the standpoint of the question of technics and industry, a question implicitly (*en creux*)

present in Nietzsche, by default as it were, a default that also goes by the name of nihilism.

Time allowing, I would dwell on Jacques Derrida. There is in his remarks something that passes, fundamentally, through structuralism—he said as much in an interview in *Le Monde*—a critique of what structuralism avoids thinking, to wit, technics, in the guise of writing: this is what is at stake in his debate with Lévi-Strauss and in the crucial importance suddenly given, and rightly so, to Leroi-Gourhan. At the horizon of this debate is the question of a contradiction inherent to structuralism; namely, its inability to think that which is *between*, what links and articulates the synchronic and the diachronic, constituting their crossing: *idiomatic differentiation itself*, which is among the principal objects of Derridean thought, not only in language but in all the diverse fields of symbolizing life.² In other words, *structuralism in the end fails to think time*, which is what concerned Derrida when he deconstructed structuralism on the basis of phenomenology, but also when he deconstructed phenomenology on the basis of the wellsprings of structuralism, Saussure in particular.

And yet I believe Derrida did not follow through on this move. He was not able to articulate his critique of structuralism with an analysis of its discourse on technics, or rather, of its lack of such a discourse (and this is also the case with both Deleuze, and, less so, Foucault), even if his critique of Saussure's rejection of writing is what makes the necessity of such a move accessible to us today.



I believe that this state of affairs originates, as far as Derrida is concerned, in his luminous but incomplete reading of phenomenology. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida at times seems, if not to confuse primary and secondary retention, then at least to reduce the difference between them, their *différance*, to a *magic skin* (*à peau de chagrin*).

As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not-now, perception and non-perception, in the zone of primordiality common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the Augenblick. . . .

The difference between retention and reproduction, between primary and secondary memory, is not the radical difference Husserl wanted between perception and non-perception; it is rather a difference between two modifications of non-perception.³

These considerations are perfectly legitimate, and I have taken them up in my own work, but with several specifications that I consider indispensable: the *difference* between primary and secondary retention is not a *radical* difference insofar as primary retention is unceasingly composed *with* secondary retention, that is to say, insofar as perception is always projected *by, upon, and in* imagination—contrary to what Husserl thinks, and Brentano as well. But it is no less the case that the *difference* remains and *constitutes* a distinction that is not an *op-position*, but precisely what I have called a *com-position*. Now this constitutive character of composition—that is, *the woof of time*—constructed by the difference between primary and secondary is a distinctive philosophical discovery on Husserl's part. At the end of his career, he supplements it with the discovery of retentional finitude and its primordial technicity in geometry. Neither of these advances were, in the end, fully acknowledged or explored in Derrida's thought. *Différance* passes through this difference, but the latter in turn presupposes the differentiation (and thus the identification) of what I have called tertiary retention—the name for everything at stake in *The Origin of Geometry*.

The consequence of these analyses is, in effect, the necessity of affirming this *third* retention that gives *technics qua magic skin*, as the fetish and screen of projection of all the fantasies that arise from this difference without opposition, as its very composition. There is a history of this difference that does not oppose and that is a *différance*, and this history is that of the supplement as magic skin.

So in referring to Balzac's famous novel, I am not saying that Derrida reduces the two Husserlian forms of retention to the same thing, but that he maintains in a certain sense that it is impossible to stipulate the difference between the two. And one cannot but be tempted to conclude that primary retention, in its difference from secondary retention, is in the end a vain distinction. I believe, on the contrary, that this difference is constantly playing itself out, as

différance, in that which tertiary retention projects and supports, and as the magic skin of a will to power that is no longer that of a consciousness or a simple subject, but that is also a power and a knowledge—which compose while destroying themselves, by mutating, for instance, into technoscience.

If this is the case, if this magic skin is not, in other words, thought as such, and is not effectively analyzed step by step as history of the supplement—that is, also as a genealogy that is the traceology of the “gray genealogy”—it is because Derrida, fearing that this would entail a return to a metaphysics of the supplement (for example, one that would reaffirm with Hegel a specificity of alphabetical writing immediately presented as superior), does not want to identify what tertiary retention is as exteriorized memory—*that is, as technics*. Technics is what ties and unties the relation between primary and secondary retention, what lets them be distinguished without opposing them.

Consequently, all the work Derrida tried to carry out on structuralism and against its metaphysics—for structuralism is a metaphysics—was not brought to term: he was never able to set out this structure that is irreducible to structuralism and that the technical system constitutes as tertiary retentional apparatuses, the mastery and control of which, as *disciplinary society* and then *society of control*, enables *powers* to mobilize *knowledges* in order to annul *wills* (that is, processes of individuation) in a capitalist will to power.



If Derrida must be read and reread, and if he must nevertheless be criticized in this respect, it must be done by retracing the history of modern philosophy from Marx’s questions as they were articulated around the fact of *machinism*. Marx’s question is that of the economy as thought in the epoch of machinism and on the basis of the unprecedented novelty of which this epoch consists. Marxian machinism is not the question of technics: as surprising as it may sound, and despite the richness of what Kostas Axelos wrote, I think that technics is what Marx never succeeded at thinking. During Axelos’s thesis defense of *Marx, Thinker of Technics*,

Raymond Aron retorted that Marx's thought concerns not technics, but capital. Perhaps this was unfair, but it was not simply false or mean.

The fact remains that *it is the machine that effects the intrinsic articulation of capital and technics*, insofar as the machine opens up a process of the discreditation and formalization of the activities of bodies and minds. And this is what cannot as yet be thought with Derrida.

On the other hand, and I would particularly like to insist on this, it is *thanks* to Derrida that machinism becomes thinkable as what I call, borrowing the term from Sylvain Auroux, the process of grammatization. Today, political economy and the struggles in which it consists must be rethought by placing the industrial revolution, or more exactly the *various* industrial revolutions, within the evolution of a process of grammatization beginning before the Neolithic period, and that belongs to what Derrida called a history of the supplement, but that he never undertook himself. This is what I claim in *Fidelity at the Limits of Deconstruction* (I further developed the concept of grammatization inspired by Auroux in *Of Symbolic Misery* and in *Misbelief and Discredit*).

Capitalism has transformed itself to a great extent since Marx's time, consolidating itself throughout the twentieth century in the form of a new organization of libidinal economy. Jean-François Lyotard opened these themes up a bit, but I believe he was unable to follow through with this because that would have required a critique of Freud that remains to be elaborated. The work of Foucault and of Deleuze met with the same problem. The future of philosophy entails a new thinking of capitalism, not only as a libidinal economy, but insofar as, at its present stage, it encounters this new contradiction, which says that *in exploiting the libido, capitalism destroys it*. Now the struggle against this destruction itself presupposes a thinking of the wild skin—that is, of technics, what I call the supports of production, which are not mere means of production, as Marxists and Freudians mistakenly believe.

Thinking capitalism and its self-destructive tendency—for if it is true that the principal energy of capital is now libido, its tendency

to destroy and then replace the latter with a drive-based apparatus is both its limit and in a certain respect its auto-immune destiny, to borrow one of Derrida's most well-known analyses—does not imply condemning it, but developing a critique of it, in the Kantian sense. It is a matter of struggling against what, in capitalism, constitutes a deathly, regressive tendency to negate its limit.

Marx's failure in this regard stems from not being able to think time, since he was lacking, just as Kant and Freud were, the concept of primary retention formalized by Husserl. He was lacking the passage through Husserl. Marx presents himself as the critic of this metaphysics of form that idealism is. But, in fact, he reverses it into a *metaphysics of matter*. We have, then, a materialist, *that is*, a metaphysician. This is why Marx fails to think technics through the machine, despite all the indispensable discoveries he makes in thinking the latter.

Technics cannot be thought with a materialist model: this is what Simondon demonstrated through his concepts of *process of concretization* and *process of individuation*. Yet neither can it be conceived through an idealist model, which is to say a formalist and substantialist one, because what has to be thought in technics is something in *excess* of these *oppositions*. Technics in all its stages, including the machinist stage, is the fruit of a process of psychosocial individuation constituted by tertiary retention, that is, by a state of *matter organized by the libido* and as the radical transformation of what Simondon describes as vital individuation, which thereby becomes psychic and collective, that is, social (psychosocial individuation is that which, as a *metastable process*, enables one to think that which conjoins the synchronic and the diachronic). These questions already constitute the horizon of Marx's *German Ideology*. But Marx remains caught in the hylemorphic schema that opposes form and matter.

Phenomenology must today be criticized through Marx's thought. But the converse has to take place as well. And this must also be done with Freud, against Freud, and if not with an eye on the analytic philosophy stemming from logical positivism and its translations into cognitive science, then at least through an analysis that

would account for cognitive technologies, the formal machines and symbolic apparatuses that form, as technologies of spirit, the most recent stage of grammatization with biotechnology, bionics, and nanotechnology. Although the models of the cognitive science yield scant theoretical results, their industrial results are very important . . . and allow for fascinating connections with philosophical and psychoanalytic questions—for example, with neurophysiology and neurobiology.



The future of philosophy is in struggle. That this future is also the heritage of these pasts of phenomenology, Marxism, psychoanalysis and the cognitivist spinoffs of analytical philosophy goes without saying, provided that these modes of thought do not constitute new scholasticisms. Not only does philosophy have a future, but the only nonbarbarian future for the industrialized world is in philosophy. Were philosophy no longer to be in the world, it would be the death of the world; it would be vile, unworldly (*immonde*). But this philosophy can only be a political philosophy, that is, a political economy, which is to say a technology as well: an altogether novel relation to technology and society, to the extent that the latter lives essentially through technological questions.

Yet technics is in excess of philosophy—in excess in all senses of the term. Technics is excess, which becomes apparent to ordinary people primarily when technics becomes industrial, as technology. But this also implies that the big question is *excess as such*, which is inseparable from technics and unthinkable outside of a thinking of technics, but which gets translated into *libido* (the question of Dionysos). Consequently, it is a matter of reinventing the philosophical to-come (*l'à venir*) of the world by getting beyond what has, from the beginning and even *as the very origin of philosophy*, been the *suppression* of technics. The time has come to think technics on the basis of desire, and desire from out of technics: the question of a psychic and collective individuation to be elaborated as a new libidinal economy, that is, as a new social organization and a revolution of capitalism as the latest stage of the process of grammatization—of the history of the supplement.

Notes

This article is a considerably modified version of a paper originally published as a series of answers to the questions of a Brazilian journal on the future of “French theory” after the death of Jacques Derrida and after the May 29th referendum on the European constitution.

Epigraphs. *La Peau de chagrin*, known in English as *The Magic Skin* or *The Wild Ass's Skin*, is an 1831 novel by Honoré de Balzac. A perennial favorite in France, it represents the more “magical” side of Balzac’s realism. After losing his last coin in a gambling house, a young man, Raphaël de Valentin, is driven to suicide by these unlucky first steps in the world of society. Instead of jumping into the Seine, however, he finds himself in a strange antiquary’s shop, where he comes upon the titular “*peau de chagrin*.” A *chagrin*—or, in English, a *shagreen*—here refers to a type of rough leather with a granular surface, occasionally used as a sort of file; Littré tells us the later meaning of *chagrin* as “displeasure” or “ill-temper” develops from the way in which a *chagrin* can be thus used as a metaphor for a gnawing trouble. Raphaël, however, has found no normal shagreen—this is a magic skin that can grant its bearer’s every wish, although it will shrink bit by bit upon the accomplishment of each desire so indulged, finally disappearing along with the life-force of its owner. Raphaël thus spends his life in wishing, and (with his health and the skin diminishing day by day) is finally consumed, extinguished in one final act of passion with an unrequited love of his youth. “À *peau de chagrin*” remains a commonly used idiom for any such gradual but perilous decrease.—Eds.

1. Marc Crépon’s thesis in *Altérités de l’Europe* (Paris: Galilée, 2006) boils down to this.
2. This question of the idiom structures the reflection undertaken by Marc Crépon in *Altérités de l’Europe* as well as in both his *Langue sans demeure* (Paris: Galilée 2005) and *Géographies de l’esprit* (Paris: Payot, 1996).
3. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 65.