

SEMIOTEXT(E) INTERVENTION SERIES

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# The Uprising

On Poetry and Finance

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## Introduction

These texts were written in 2011, the first year of the European uprising, when European society entered into a deep crisis that seems to me much more a crisis of social imagination than mere economics. Economic dogma has taken hold of the public discourse for three decades, and has destroyed the critical power of political reason. The collapse of the global economy has exposed the dangers of economic dogmatism, but its ideology has already been incorporated into the automatisms of living society.

Political decision has been replaced by technolinguistic automatisms embedded in the interconnected global machine, and social choices are submitted to psychic automatisms embedded in social discourse and in the social imaginary.

But the depth of the catastrophe represented by the collapse is awakening hidden potencies of the social brain. The financial collapse marks the beginning of an insurrection whose first glimpses

were seen in London, Athens, and Rome in December 2010, and which became massive in the May-June *acampada* in Spain, in the four August nights of rage in the English suburbs, and in the wave of strikes and occupations in the US.

The European collapse is not simply the effect of a crisis that is only economic and financial—this is a crisis of imagination about the future, as well. The Maastricht rules have become unquestionable dogmas, algorithmic formulae and magical spells guarded by the high priests of the European Central Bank and promoted by stockbrokers and advisors.

Financial power is based on the exploitation of precarious, cognitive labor: the general intellect in its present form of separation from the body.

The general intellect, in its present configuration, is fragmented and dispossessed of self-perception and self-consciousness. Only the conscious mobilization of the erotic body of the general intellect, only the poetic revitalization of language, will open the way to the emergence of a new form of social autonomy.

### Irreversibility

It's difficult for someone of my generation to break free of the intellectual automatism of the dialectical happy ending.

Just as the Vienna Congress's restoration was followed by the People's Spring in 1848, just as fascism was followed by resistance and liberation, so now the political instinct of my generation (the '68 generation, the last modern generation, in a sense) is expecting the restoration of democracy, the return of social solidarity, and the reversal of financial dictatorship.

This expectation may be deceptive, and we should be able to enhance the space of our historical prefiguration, so as to become able to abandon the conceptual framework of historical progress, and to imagine the prospect of irreversibility. In the sphere of the current bio-economic totalitarianism, the incorporation of techno-linguistic automatisms produced by semio-capital has produced a form that is not an external domination that acts on the body, but a mutation of the social organism itself. This is why historical dialectics no longer work at the level of understanding the process and the prospects: the prospect of irreversibility is replacing the prospect of subversion, so we have to rethink the concept of autonomy from this perspective.

"Irreversibility" is a taboo word in modern political discourse, because it contradicts the principle of rational government of the flow of events—which is the necessary condition of rational government, and the primary contribution

of humanism to the theory and the practice of modern politics. Machiavelli speaks of the Prince as a male force who is able to subdue *fortuna* (chance, the chaotic flow of events), the female side of history.

What we are experiencing now, in the age of infinite acceleration of the infosphere, is the following: feminine *fortuna* can no longer be subjected and domesticated by the masculine force of political reason, because *fortuna* is embodied in the chaotic flows of the overcrowded infosphere and in the chaotic flows of financial microtrading. The disproportion between the arrival rate of new information and the limited time available for conscious processing generates hypercomplexity. Therefore projects that propose to rationally change the whole social field are out of the picture.

The horizon of our time is marked by the Fukushima event. Compared to the noisy catastrophes of the earthquake and the tsunami, Tokyo's silent apocalypse is more frightening and suggests a new framework of social expectation for daily life on the planet. The megalopolis is directly exposed to the Fukushima fallout, but life is proceeding almost normally. Only a few people have abandoned the city. Most citizens have stayed there, buying mineral water as they have always done, breathing with face masks on their mouths as they have always done. A few cases of air and water contamination are

denounced. Concerns about food safety have prompted US officials to halt the importation of certain foods from Japan. But the Fukushima effect does not imply a disruption of social life: poison has become a normal feature of daily life, the second nature we have to inhabit.

During the last few years disruptions have multiplied in the planetary landscape, but they have not produced a change in the dominant paradigm, a conscious movement of self-organization, or a revolutionary upheaval.

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has not led to the eviction of BP, it has rather consolidated its power, because BP was the only force which could manage the disruption and hopefully bring it under control.

The financial collapse of September 2008 did not lead to a change in US economic politics. Despite the hopes raised by Barack Obama's victory, the financial class did not relax its grip on the economy.

In Europe, after the Greek crisis in 2010, neoliberal ideology—although clearly the source of the collapse—has not been dismissed. On the contrary, the Greek disruption (and the following Irish and Italian and Spanish and Portuguese disruptions) has strengthened the rigor of monetarist policies and stressed the prospect of reducing salaries and social spending.

At a systemic level, change is taking the form of positive feedback.

In his work on cybernetics, Norbert Wiener speaks of negative feedback in order to define the output of a system when it acts to oppose changes to the input of the system, with the result that the changes are reduced and attenuated. If the overall feedback of the system is negative, then the system will tend to be stable. In the social field, for instance, we can say that the system is exhibiting negative feedback if protests and fights oblige the industry to increase salaries and reduce exploitation when social misery becomes too hard and too widespread.

In Wiener's parlance, a system exhibits positive feedback when, on the contrary, it increases the magnitude of a perturbation in response to the perturbation itself. Obviously, unintended positive feedback may be far from being "positive" in the sense of desirable. We can also speak of self-reinforcing feedback.

My impression is this: in conditions of info-acceleration and hypercomplexity, as the conscious and rational will becomes unable to check and to adjust the trends, the trends themselves become self-reinforcing up to the point of final collapse. Look at the vicious circle: right-wing electoral victories and dictatorships of ignorance. When right-wing parties win, their first preoccupation

is to impoverish public schooling and to prop up media conformism. The result of the spread of ignorance and conformism will be a new electoral victory, and so on. This is why it is difficult not to see the future of Europe as a dark blend of techno-financial authoritarianism and aggressive populist reaction.

Autonomy, in this condition, will be essentially the ability to escape environments where the positive feedback is switched on. How is it possible to do that, when we know that the planetary environment and global society are increasingly subjected to this catastrophic trend?

How can we think of a process of subjectivation when precarity is jeopardizing social solidarity and when the social body is wired by technolinguistic automatisms which reduce its activity to a repetition of embedded patterns of behavior?

With this book, I am trying to develop the theoretical suggestions of Christian Marazzi, Paolo Virno, and Maurizio Lazzarato in an unusual direction. These thinkers have conceptualized the relation between language and the economy, and described the subsumption and the subjugation of the biopolitical sphere of affection and language to financial capitalism. I am looking for a way to subvert this subjugation, and I try to do that from the unusual perspectives of poetry and sensibility.

## Swarm

When the social body is wired by techno-linguistic automatisms, it acts as a swarm: a collective organism whose behavior is automatically directed by connective interfaces.

A multitude is a plurality of conscious and sensitive beings sharing no common intentionality, and showing no common pattern of behavior. The crowd shuffling in the city moves in countless different directions with countless different motivations. Everybody goes their own way, and the intersection of those displacements makes a crowd. Sometimes the crowd moves in a coordinated way: people run together towards the station because the train is soon expected to leave, people stop together at traffic lights. Everybody moves following his or her will, within the constraints of social interdependency.

If we want to understand something more about the present social subjectivity, the concept of the multitude needs to be complemented with the concepts of the network and swarm.

A network is a plurality of organic and artificial beings, of humans and machines who perform common actions thanks to procedures that make possible their interconnection and interoperation. If you do not adapt to these procedures, if you don't follow the technical rules of the game, you

are not playing the game. If you don't react to certain stimuli in the programmed way, you don't form part of the network. The behavior of persons in a network is not aleatory, like the movements of a crowd, because the network implies and predisposes pathways for the networker.

A swarm is a plurality of living beings whose behavior follows (or seems to follow) rules embedded in their neural systems. Biologists call a swarm a multitude of animals of similar size and bodily orientation, moving together in the same direction and performing actions in a coordinated way, like bees building a hive or moving toward a plant where they can find resources for making honey.

In conditions of social hypercomplexity, human beings tend to act as a swarm. When the infosphere is too dense and too fast for a conscious elaboration of information, people tend to conform to shared behavior. In a letter to John Seabrook, Bill Gates wrote: "the digital revolution is all about facilitation—creating tools to make things easy" (Seabrook, 52). In a broader sense, we may say that in the digital age, power is all about making things easy.

In a hypercomplex environment that cannot be properly understood and governed by the individual mind, people will follow simplified pathways and will use complexity-reducing interfaces.

This is why social behavior today seems to be trapped into regular and inescapable patterns of

interaction. Techno-linguistic procedures, financial obligations, social needs, and psycho-media invasion—all this capillary machinery is framing the field of the possible, and incorporating common cognitive patterns in the behavior of social actors.

So we may say that social life in the semio-capital sphere is becoming a swarm.

In a swarm it is not impossible to say “no.” It’s irrelevant. You can express your refusal, your rebellion and your nonalignment, but this is not going to change the direction of the swarm, nor is it going to affect the way in which the swarm’s brain is elaborating information.

### Automation of Language

The implication of language in the financial economy is crucial in the contemporary process of subjectivation.

In this book, I am trying to think about the process of emancipating language and affects, and I start from the concept of insolvency.

Insolvency is not only a refusal to pay the costs of the economic crisis provoked by the financial class, but it is also a rejection of the symbolic debt embodied in the cultural and psychic normalization of daily life. Misery is based on the cultural conformism of the nuclear family, on the secluded privacy of individual existence. Privatization of

needs and affects has subjected social energies to the chain of capitalist culture. The history of capitalist domination cannot be dissociated from the production and privatization of need—i.e., the creation of cultural and psychic habits of dependence. Social insolvency means independence from the list of priorities that capitalist conformism has imposed on society.

From a linguistic and affective point of view, insolvency is the line of escape from the reduction of language to exchange.

The connective sign recombines automatically in the universal language machine: the digital-financial machine that codifies existential flows. The word is drawn into this process of automation, so we find it frozen and abstract in the disempathetic life of a society that has become incapable of solidarity and autonomy. The automation of the word takes place on two levels.

The first level concerns monetarization and subjection to the financial cycle: signs fall under the domination of finance when the financial function (the accumulation of value through semiotic circulation) cancels the instinctual side of enunciation, so that what is enunciated may be compatible with digital-financial formats. The production of meaning and of value takes the form of parthenogenesis: signs produce signs without any longer passing through the flesh.

Monetary value produces more monetary value without being first realized through the material production of goods.

A second level is indexicalization. In his paper titled "Quand les mots valent de l'or," Frédéric Kaplan speaks of the process of language's indexicalization in the framework of Internet search engines. Two algorithms define the reduction of linguistic meaning to economic value via a Google search: the first finds the various occurrences of a word, the second links words with monetary value.

The subsumption of language by the semio-capitalist cycle of production effectively freezes the affective potencies of language.

The history of this subsumption passes through the twentieth century, and poetry predicted and prefigured the separation of language from the affective sphere. Ever since Rimbaud called for a *dérèglement de tous les sens*, poets have experimented with the forgetting of the referent and with the autonomous evocation of the signifier.

The experience of French and Russian symbolism broke the referential-denotative link between the word and the world. At the same time, symbolist poets enhanced the connotational potency of language to the point of explosion and hyperinclusion. Words became polysemous evocations for other words, and thus became epiphanic. This magic of postreferential language anticipated the general

process of dereferentialization that occurred when the economy became a semio-economy.

The financialization of the capitalist economy implies a growing abstraction of work from its useful function, and of communication from its bodily dimension. As symbolism experimented with the separation of the linguistic signifier from its denotational and referential function, so financial capitalism, after internalizing linguistic potencies, has separated the monetary signifier from its function of denotation and reference to physical goods.

Financial signs have led to a parthenogenesis of value, creating money through money without the generative intervention of physical matter and muscular work. Financial parthenogenesis sucks down and dries up every social and linguistic potency, dissolving the products of human activity, especially of collective semiotic activity.

The word is no longer a factor in the conjunction of talking affective bodies, but a connector of signifying functions transcoded by the economy. Once deprived of its conjunctive ability, the word becomes a recombinant function, a discreet (versus continuous) and formalized (versus instinctual) operator.

In 1977 the American anthropologist Rose Khon Goldsen, in *The Show and Tell Machine*, wrote the following words: "We are breeding a new generation of human beings who will learn more words from a machine than from their mothers."



That generation is here. The connective generation entering the social scene today fully suffers the pathogenic and disempathetic effects of the automation of the word.

### Poetry and the Deautomation of Language

*We have too many things and not enough forms.*

—Gustave Flaubert, *Préface à la vie d'écrivain*

*Form fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself.*

—Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*

The voice and poetry are two strategies for reactivation.

Once poetry foresaw the abandonment of referentiality and the automation of language; now poetry may start the process of reactivating the emotional body, and therefore of reactivating social solidarity, starting from the reactivation of the desiring force of enunciation.

For Giorgio Agamben, in *Language and Death*, the voice is the point of conjunction between meaning and flesh. The voice is the bodily singularity of the signifying process, and cannot be reduced to the operational function of language, notwithstanding the research in protocols and procedures for vocal recognition.

Poetry is the voice of language, in this sense: it is the reemergence of the deictic function (from *deixis*, self-indication) of enunciation. Poetry is the here and now of the voice, of the body, and of the word, sensuously giving birth to meaning.

While the functionality of the operational word implies a reduction of the act of enunciation to connective recombability, poetry is the excess of sensuousness exploding into the circuitry of social communication and opening again the dynamic of the infinite game of interpretation: desire.

In the introduction to the first volume of his seminal book *Du Sens*, Algirdas Julien Greimas speaks of interpretation as an infinite slippage of the transition from signifier to signified.

This infinite slippage (or slide, or drift) is based on the intimate ambiguity of the emotional side of language (language as excess movement).

We have to start a process of deautomating the word, and a process of reactivating sensuousness (singularity of enunciation, the voice) in the sphere of social communication.

Desire is monstrous, it is cruel, and noncompliance and nonrecombability are at the inmost nature of singularity. Singularity cannot be compliant with a finite order of interpretation, but it can be compassionate with the infinite ambiguity of meaning as sensuous understanding. Compassion

is sensibility open to the perception of uncountable sensuous beings, the condition for an autonomous becoming-other, beyond the financial freeze, beyond the techno-linguistic conformism that is making social life a desert of meaning.

Poetic language is the insolvency in the field of enunciation: it refuses the exaction of a semiotic debt. *Deixis* (δείξις) acts against the reduction of language to indexicalization and abstract individuation, and the voice acts against the recombinant desensualization of language.

Poetic language is the occupation of the space of communication by words which escape the order of exchangeability: the road of excess, says William Blake, leads to the palace of wisdom. And wisdom is the space of singularity, bodily signification, the creation of sensuous meaning.

## THE EUROPEAN COLLAPSE

### THE FINANCIAL BLACK HOLE AND THE VANISHING WORLD

Finance is the most abstract level of economic symbolization. It is the culmination of a process of progressive abstraction that started with capitalist industrialization. Marx speaks of abstract labor in the sense of an increased distancing of human activity from its concrete usefulness. In his words, capitalism is the application of human skills as a means to obtain a more abstract goal: the accumulation of value. Nevertheless, in the age of industrialization analyzed by Marx, the production of useful goods was still a necessary step in the process of valorization itself. In order to produce abstract value, the industrial capitalist was obliged to produce useful things. This is no longer the case today, in the sphere of semio-capital. In the world of financial capitalism, accumulation no longer passes through the production of goods, but goes

## Semio-inflation

I want to say something about semio-inflation, about the special kind of inflation that happens in the field of information, of understanding, of meaning, and of affection.

William Burroughs said that inflation is essentially when you need more money to buy less things. I say that semio-inflation is when you need more signs, words, and information to buy less meaning. It is a problem of acceleration. It is a kind of hyperfuturism when the old accelerative conception of the future is the crucial tool for the capitalist goat.

Karl Marx has already said something similar. When Marx speaks of productivity, and of relative surplus value, he's speaking about acceleration. He says that, if you want to obtain a growth in productivity, which is also a growth in surplus value, you need to accelerate work time. But at a certain point acceleration steps and jumps to another dimension, to what Baudrillard would call hyperacceleration.

The acceleration of productivity in the sphere of industrial production is about intensifying the rhythm of the machine so that workers are forced to move faster in manipulating physical matter and producing physical things. When the main tool of production begins to be cognitive labor,

then acceleration enters another phase, another dimension. Increasing productivity in the sphere of semio-capitalism is essentially a problem of accelerating the infosphere.

In the sphere of semio-capital, if you want to increase productivity, what you have to do is accelerate the infosphere, the environment where information races toward the brain.

What happens, then, to our brain—to the social brain? Cognition takes time. Think of what attention is. Attention is the activation of physical reactions in the brain, and also of emotional, affective reactions. Attention cannot be infinitely accelerated. This is why the new economy has failed, at the end of the 1990s, after a long period of constant acceleration.

At the beginning of the last decade, in the year 2000, the dot-com crash was the consequence of an overexploitation of the social brain. After the explosion of the Internet bubble, suddenly several books about the attention economy appeared in bookstores.

All of a sudden, the economists became aware of the simple fact that the market of the semio-capitalist world is a market of attention. Market and attention had become the same thing. The crisis of 2000, the dot-com crash, was the effect of an overproduction in the field of attention.

Marx speaks of an overproduction crisis: if you produce too much of a certain good, people

cannot buy all those things, and the goods will remain in the stores, unsold. So, the capitalist begins firing workers, because he does not need any more production, and this worsens the situation.

This is the overproduction crisis in the framework of industrial capitalism. What is the overproduction crisis when we enter the phase of semio-capital? The overproduction lies in the relation between the amount of semiotic goods produced by cognitive labor and the amount of time that is disposed of. A society's total quantity of attentive time is not boundless, because attention cannot be accelerated past a limit. One can accelerate one's attention; one can take amphetamines, for instance. We have techniques and drugs that give us the capability of being more productive in the field of attention. But we know the problem with that. You know how it ends. The 1990s were the dot-com era, the age of increasing productivity, increasing enthusiasm for production, increasing happiness of intellectual workers. But the 1990s were also the decade of Prozac mania. One cannot understand what Alan Greenspan calls "irrational exuberance" without taking into account the simple fact that millions of cognitive workers took tons of cocaine, amphetamine, and Prozac during the 1990s.

This can work for a time, and then it ends. All of a sudden, from one day to the next, after the excitement and the acceleration, comes the apocalypse.

## Collapse

Do you remember the night of the turn of the century, when everybody was waiting for the Y2K bug? I was in front of my TV, waiting for the final collapse, and nothing happened. Nothing. It was the most horrible night of my life. I had staked all my credibility on promising everyone that that night would be the final one of our lives, and nothing happened at all, nothing. But there was an expectation of collapse in the air. How can we explain that expectation?

The collapse did not have to do with the millennium bug. The collapse represented the fall of the Prozac-fueled excitement in the social brain of the cognitive workers all over the world. When Alan Greenspan, in those months, said, "I feel an irrational exuberance in the markets," he was not speaking about the economy. He was speaking about the Prozac crash. He was speaking about the end of the cocaine high in the social brain of millions of cognitive workers.

What happened next? Well, the next step was an overproduction crisis in the field of semio-capitalism. In the first years of the century—2000, 2001—the problem was the perception of the coming collapse of capitalism, of the world economy. Then September 11th arrived, and overproduction became the solution to everything. Only a mad