States of Shock
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Introduction

1 Sovereignty and submission

In 2010 several texts appeared in France and Europe, manifestos, petitions and academic analyses concerning academic and scientific life. Quite a number of newspaper articles about national education and teaching also appeared. And various polls showed that these questions were indeed of major concern to the French people – the number one concern according to one poll, and according to others number two.¹

At the same time, Inside Job, Charles Ferguson’s 2010 documentary about financialization – an austere subject, perhaps, but one that did not prevent it from finding a record audience (and receiving a prize at Cannes), prior to the explosion of what is now called the problem of ‘sovereign debt’² – highlighted the role that American universities, and certain academics, have played in the establishment of a literally suicidal financial system.

Furthermore, in 2011 the private ratings agencies downgraded the ‘ratings’ of Ireland, Greece, Spain, the United States, Japan and Italy (as well as certain French banks) – radically challenging the very idea of sovereignty, an idea that lies at the base of those historical movements that emerged from the eighteenth century and shaped the modern world, a world in which, until recently, we more or less believed we still lived (however ‘postmodern’ it may have become).

The movements that arose in the nineteenth century in order to constitute a ‘public thing’, itself forming a sovereign public power – that is, a res publica, and in this sense a republic – led to the widespread introduction of public education, positing in principle and by right that any citizen should have the chance and the duty to receive
an education that will grant them access to that autonomy referred to by Kant as *Mündigkeit*, that is, ‘maturity’ or ‘majority’, through which the foundation would be laid for a public community and a sovereign politics.

In other words, the questions raised by *Inside Job* in the field of economics were echoed in appeals and articles about the dilapidated state of academic research and public education, and the collapse, and not just in Europe, of the economic and political credibility of the Western world, and of its legacy for the entirety of humanity, all this belonging on the same register. *All* these questions and the calamities accompanying them (and in particular the protean regression they threaten to bring with them) are generated by the very system that is sending us headlong into a world where political and economic sovereignty are eliminated and the forming of maturity via education is abandoned, a maturity that, as the autonomy obtained by frequently engaging with rational knowledge, was for the *Aufklärer* the *sine qua non* of such a sovereignty.

Western universities are in the grip of a deep malaise, and a number of them have found themselves, through some of their faculty, giving consent to – and sometimes considerably compromised by – the implementation of a financial system that, with the establishment of hyper-consumerist, drive-based and ‘addictogenic’ society, leads to economic and political ruin on a global scale. If this has occurred, it is because their goals, their organizations and their means have been put entirely at the service of the destruction of sovereignty. That is, they have been placed in the service of the destruction of sovereignty as conceived by the philosophers of what we call the Enlightenment, a sovereignty founded on *Mündigkeit*, maturity or majority understood as the exit from *Unmündigkeit*, immaturity or minority, in the Kantian sense of these notions.

Abandoning this obligation – even though we must understand its limits, so that a new political discourse can be elaborated, and a new critique of political economy, capable of projecting an alternative to what has proven to be paving the way for a global political and economic catastrophe – will lead capitalism to be destroyed from the inside, and by itself. Such an outcome does not depend on hateful speech or actions: democracy is being destroyed, not by those who ‘hate democracy’, but by those who have abandoned critique – given that a genuine democracy will constantly critique what, in it, means that it never stops changing. Public space and public time constitute a democratic public thing, a democratic public good, only to the extent that they are always precarious, and those democrats who are
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so sure of themselves as to doubt nothing (in their democracy) are always democracy’s worst enemies.

In the Western industrial world, however, democracy has given way – and has done for quite some time – to consumerism (which is now taking hold in countries that seem to feel little need for democracy). This consumerism is itself based on the liquidation of maturity through the systemic generalization of minority and the industrial dilution of responsibility, or in other words: based on the reign of stupidity [bêtise], and of what so often accompanies it, namely cowardice and viciousness. It is this development that has been internalized by the academic world as simply a fact, with no alternative. And it is the possibility that there is an alternative to this fact, and as a new law, that we wish to assert here.

2 The war of reason against reason

The Aufklärung, writes Kant, is Mündigkeit, that is, maturity, that reason that is formed only through ‘humanity’s emergence from its […] Unmündigkeit, its minority. [That is, from] the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.’ The passage from immaturity to maturity, from minority to majority, is a conquest, according to Kant, and this conquest is referred to as the Aufklärung: the Aufklärung is an historical movement. What was gained with the Enlightenment, and thanks to it, is however, what is at present being lost: it is literally being squandered in the course of a war of reason, and in this war, as we shall see, reason stands on both sides of the conflict, as if reason were at war with itself.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer posited in 1944, in Dialectic of Enlightenment, that this historical movement leads to a reversal and eventually to an inversion of the goals of this Enlightenment, and that reason as a political, economic and social stake thereby decomposes into what Weber and Habermas called rationalization – where reason comes to serve what the Frankfurt School called reification.

These questions – sovereignty, minority, majority, reason and even history – no longer seem to be posed in these terms, as if what is referred to as ‘postmodernity’ had emptied them of content. For this reason, at the very moment when we are discovering that some of the greatest universities participated in the implementation of a system conceived by the ‘conservative revolution’ – a system lying at the origin of financialization and installing an economy of carelessness [économie de l’incurie] on a global scale, founded on a systemic
extension of stupidity, which is also to say one of submission, infantilization and regression to minority – it also seems that the legacy of twentieth-century thought is simply to leave the human beings of the twenty-first century totally defenceless and unarmed in the face of a situation that appears hopeless.

This is also why I believe we must reopen the question of what links academic research, public education, politics and economics. It is a question that must be revisited in a profound way. We must, on the basis of the questions raised by not only Adorno and Horkheimer but also Karl Polanyi, re-read both:

- the texts of so-called ‘poststructuralist’ thought; and
- the corpus that dominated the Parisian intellectual scene prior to the appearance of this so-called ‘French thought’ – that is, the dialectical philosophies of Hegel and Marx.

As for the texts or initiatives that have recently emerged from the academic world, triggered by the crisis of the university and the school, I refer in particular to five:

- a call to the political responsibility of academics launched in Italy with the title *After the End of the University*, confronting the catastrophic policy pursued in that country by Silvio Berlusconi (http://th-rough.eu/writers/bifo-eng/after-end-university);
- a legal challenge undertaken in Portugal by three economists at the University of Coimbra and an economist at the University of Lisbon, against the ratings agencies responsible for downgrading Portugal’s sovereign debt rating;
- a petition launched in France in favour of ‘slow science’ (slowscience.fr);
- a call for the organization of a civil society seminar on the stakes of research (sciencescitoyennes.org);
- a manifesto launched in Paris calling for the development of digital humanities in French universities, signed by researchers from the EHESS, the laboratories of CNRS, and some thirty French universities.

This final text did indeed clear my vision, which was essential in order to comprehend the crisis of the university, a crisis that stems from the radical transformation of the modern world brought about by the appearance of analogue technologies in the twentieth century and the development of digital technologies in the twenty-first century.
I will attempt to show that the disarming and rearming of thought are essentially tied to the possibility of theorizing and practising these *hupomnēmata* – I will try to show this by offering a commentary on *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), in the context of the advent of public access to the internet via the world wide web, which occurred on 30 April 1993, fourteen years after Jean-François Lyotard published his book.

### 3 Shocks, therapies, pharmacology

As for the poll that showed (in the context of the then upcoming 2012 French presidential election) that education and teaching are the premier concern of the French public, it echoes an article that appeared in *Le Figaro* on 29 July 2011, on which I will offer a detailed commentary in the next chapter.³

The crisis in education – education, which was conceived on the basis of writing in order to form a ‘public that reads’, as Kant said – is nothing new. In Part II, I argue:

- that the reason this has become of such concern to the French public is that the situation has reached a point of no return, directly related above all to the deployment of analogue technologies during the 1960s (leading to the hegemonic rule of what Adorno and Horkheimer called the culture industry), and then, beginning in the 1990s, of digital technologies;
- that this question involves the entire academic project, and that it amounts to the question of what, with Ars Industrialis, I refer to as ‘technologies of the spirit’.⁴

This analysis leads me to propose in the second part of this work that, in all universities and in all disciplines, ‘digital studies’ programs should be developed (of which so-called ‘digital humanities’ would be a specific element).

In the course of these inquiries I will relate the crises of education and the university to Naomi Klein’s analysis, in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*,⁵ of the way in which this shock strategy was applied in the United States to complete the destruction of public education in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. The current economic catastrophe is no doubt the subject of similar strategies, referred to as ‘shock therapies’. And Europe is now massively confronted with just such strategies.
Faced with this situation, universities – that is, academics, lecturers and students – must assume their responsibilities at a time when this strategy, which is a ‘market’ strategy, is, in Europe, attacking the very structures of political sovereignty.

This work aims to supply conceptual, that is, peaceful, weapons, and to open up prospects for action founded on rational, that is, political, argument, in order positively to oppose proposals for, or impositions of, ‘shock therapies’. These should be opposed in France, in Europe and throughout the industrial world, a world fortunate enough still to possess public education and research systems, but also in those countries that once had such systems but have since lost them – for example, Chile, where 2011 was marked by a battle by students for the right to public higher education, and against the catastrophic degradation of teaching and research that occurred after privatization, a situation orchestrated by Augusto Pinochet, by Milton Friedman and by the latter’s so-called ‘Chicago School’ of economics.

Working here from a pharmacological perspective that I have already put forward elsewhere, I develop an analysis of the question of therapies in general, given that technological shocks, which have constituted the basis of capitalism ever since the implementation of what Joseph Schumpeter called ‘Creative Destruction’ (the capital letters are his), must in our time be rethought.

A ‘social therapeutics’ for the shocks caused by technological pharmaka is what politics must prescribe. For a lengthy period of time this did in fact take place, from the moment politics became, in the industrial ages of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a political economy that required an overall industrial policy. But this is no longer the case, specifically since the ‘conservative revolution’. I argue here that it is therefore a matter of completely rethinking industrial political economy in the hyper-industrial epoch of the twenty-first century. This is why I propose a re-reading of Hegel in chapter 5 and of Marx in chapter 6.

The shock therapies implemented by neoliberalism – under the guidance of Milton Friedman, whose methods were put to the test in Chile after the assassination of Salvador Allende – may have proven their ‘efficacy’ in the short term (while nevertheless leading in the medium to long term to the contemporary catastrophe wherein this suicidal doctrine proves to have installed an economy of carelessness and neglect). But if this has been possible, it is only because the university, as a project of modernity fundamentally proceeding from the Enlightenment and the Kantian discourse on The Conflict of the Faculties (I will return to this in chapter 8), has been incapable of
thinking shock in general, and the shock that technics always is, insofar as it is irreducibly pharmacological, this being even more true when technics becomes technology.

Universities may not have managed to know or do anything about this, but this is less because they have been prevented from doing so, or because they have been bought off (even if this has also happened), than because their development has been based on something that has remained unthinkable, even repressed: the repression of the role of technics in the constitution of the ‘noetic soul’ in general, and in the formation of every form of knowledge. And the repression in particular of the role of technics in theoretical knowledge: the mnemotechnics that is writing is the condition of possibility of reason (of logos and of its logic) as theorematic faculty. Analogue and digital mnemotechnologies, however, represent a new stage of the process of grammatization, a process through which alphabetic writing led to the foundation of the polis.

Digital technology is a new stage of writing (and thus also of reading), an industrial system founded on the production and activation of traces, of ‘grammes’ and ‘graphemes’ that discretize, affect, reproduce and transform every flux and flow (well beyond just language). This writing is produced and written in silicon with new codes, tools, instruments and devices of publication, and the story must be told from this perspective, from clay and papyrus to today’s micro-electronic structures (and tomorrow’s nano-electronic, if not bionic) that encode in silicon the industrial standards we refer to as ASCII, XML, and so on, that ‘scan’ the algorithms of search engines that automate reading and writing, and that index, ‘tag’ and categorize the new metalanguages which all of this presupposes – the totality of which results in generalized traceability and trackability.

The massive and brutal eruption of these new kinds of hypomnēmata radically changes the very conditions of education and research, as well as the relations between educational institutions and universities on the one hand, and what lies outside them on the other hand. This protean ‘outside’ is now permanently ‘inside’, thanks to computers and mobile phones, but also to those ‘reforms’ intended to dictate to the Academy in its totality the non-academic imperatives to which it is now required to submit. These imperatives arise from a technological shock strategy, the result of which is that the conditions of autonomy and heteronomy of academic institutions in a broad sense (in a sense whereby education and research together form the academic world, the matrix for which takes shape in Athens in the fourth century BCE) find themselves radically changed.