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Pay it all back: paranoid writing/writing paranoia

Nathan Moore

Birkbeck College, School of Law

“A paranoid might be defined as someone who has some idea as to what is actually going on”
(Burroughs: 2001, 161)

INTRODUCTION

Academic propriety is quickly exhausted when writing of Burroughs and paranoia. Of course, the subject of Burroughs alone is enough to make the medium of critical academic work – the word – unwieldy and difficult to contain. Syntax and semantics begin to disrupt themselves, leading one to face a stylistic problem: how to write academically if the word itself is considered as a virus? One can, of course, always take the distance of the critic – but this makes it difficult to write much without freezing the subject, of missing him, and giving oneself the illusion that one has successfully *systematised* Burroughs, subjecting his word to some meta-word. The point, though, is that the word as virus is not operating at the ‘meta-’ level, but is instead immanent to itself: this is the condition of its virality.

Adding paranoia only adds to the problem; yet, paranoia is the true condition of interdisciplinarity. Critical writing has to be slightly outside of itself, not quite capable of being anchored in the way in which we might desire (Goodrich: 2020). The job requires a certain amount of delirium and disorientation. In fact, neither of these should be foreign to us, yet their potential often gives way to the seemingly more ‘practical’ concerns of better management and/or better activism. However, being rigorous in fact demands better investigation and awareness of where rigour meets the points of its dissipation. It is a question of immanence: the zone of indiscernibility where, for Deleuze and Guattari, we must encounter the transcendental field responsible for distributing what we think of as rigorous procedure (Deleuze & Guattari: 1994, Chapter Two). Not for freedom, but for creative practicality (Moore: 2020); that is, for life.

WRITING PARANOIA

Burroughs’ statement on being paranoid, from 1970, is located at the juncture of an overlap between two regimes, the first being the disciplinary regime investigated by Foucault and the second, the regime of control as outlined by Deleuze. Consequently, what Burroughs can be taken to mean by ‘a paranoid’ should be understood as being referable to both. On the one hand, the individualised subject of discipline is persecuted by what they don’t know yet suspect; on the other, the individualised subject of control is persecuted by what they do know but don’t wish to know. A certain delusion is operative in relation to both, concerned with the problem (or, as Arendt calls it, the crisis) of authority.

A paranoid is one who is unable to contain themselves: either there is something threatening the integrity of their bordered self (a danger from without); or they are unable to maintain the harmonic composition of their identity (a danger from within). In either case, they are beside themselves or, more specifically, they are beside their own thinking, out of their minds, and taunted by a rationality

that seems to run parallel to their own. Two things should be noted straight away: 1) that the persecution from within and without is, in essence, the same thing; or better, that if we pursue either tendency far enough, we find it bending back around, such that the exterior leads to the interior and *vice versa*. 2) That paranoia is the lived experience of authority's failure. As both Carl Schmitt (Schmitt: 2008, 458-9) and Hannah Arendt (Arendt: 2000) have made clear, authority should not be confused with power (*potestas* – but nor should it be confused with *potentia* either). Authority does not coerce or, even, act. What it does do is to affirm power, giving it an orientation and weight that power cannot provide to itself. Authority provides something akin to a frame of reference, by which networks of power can be ordered, utilised, tracked, discussed, reviewed, etc. For this reason, authority might be considered as an obstacle to paranoia: it prevents the possibility of a parallel rationality by giving the latter an orientation and centre of gravity. However, this is certainly nothing more than an ideal: the problem, under both discipline and control, is not only the way in which authority fails to keep power contained (and following the Foucauldian analysis, how it fails to keep knowledge properly referenced), *but also the way in which it must fail if authority is to be operative at all*. I have put the last in italics to highlight that it is the statement of a paranoid.

It follows that there is a third important point: paranoia is a type of delirium. This means that paranoia is not simply knowing the world: it is not a collection of facts that provides clear evidence that the paranoid is right to be paranoid; rather it is a delusional relation to knowledge/power in the sense that what is encountered is not some definite factual persecution but, instead, the limits of what is known. Crucially here, it is not a subsequent problem of gaining more knowledge or data, so as to extend the limits of knowledge; rather it is the awareness – and it is this awareness that calls for a delusional relation to one's own parallel mind – that the limits of knowledge are inherent to, and defining of, knowledge itself. This is why the paranoid person does not know what is going on *but knows something about what is going on*, implying of course that they cannot be contained by events and, consequently, that they are beside events, parallel to them. However, the important point here is that the delusion cannot be cured or rectified: quite simply, a paranoid is right to be paranoid.

In which case, the interesting question concerns those who deny their paranoia; those who, being out of their minds, are not able to recognise this fact. It is here that the function of authority has a particular significance.

Speculatively, the problem of paranoia stems from the impossibility of proving a negative ('they are not out to get me', 'I am not of interest to them', 'I am not important'). Being unable to prove the negative, its opposite becomes a possibility that cannot finally be dismissed: because I cannot definitively prove that they are not out to get me, I cannot finally dismiss the possibility that they are out to get me. What is lacking here is a functional authority that can determine the question one way or the other ('yes, they have it in for you'; 'no, they have no interest in you; furthermore, *they don't exist*'). A functional authority depends, of course, upon the acceptance of that authority as having sufficient mass, such that it can serve as a gravitational point of orientation for the paranoid's questions. In other words, authority is sufficient in this context when it can limit and/or direct the wild unfolding of the parallel mind. The question of *sufficiency* depends upon the type of regime in question.

For brevity, I will take Deleuze's account as being sufficient here. The disciplinary regime holds and moulds (Deleuze: 1995, 178); separating, confining, and assigning bodies, it makes the individual by placing them in relation to a range of normative images, to which their distance from, and conformity with, can be measured. Through such measurement, the individual becomes what they are, located via the coordination of these relative normative images. This is when things work well.

On the other side, the problem opens up as to the visibility of the relevant images, posing a question in two directions: has the right norm been applied to a particular individual; and, have all of the active norms been sufficiently revealed and made accountable? Are there hidden forces at work? As Foucault pointed out, the central consequence of the type of visibility demanded by a disciplinary regime is not the lived assurance of being in the right place at the right time but, instead, *malveillance*: endemic mistrust circulating throughout the entire regime (Foucault: 1988, 146). What does a paranoid know in such a situation? That there is something operative that is invisible and, because invisible, likely determinative of what they, the paranoid person, lives and experiences. Under discipline, authority promises reassurance as to the appropriate application of the correct norms; consequently, authority is called into question if the norms seem irrelevant, distorted or incomplete; yet, more than this, we must suppose that discipline withdraws this promise by the same gesture by which it extends it.ⁱ

Normativity fosters the perception that the way in which one lives has an explanation: not a profound or essential explanation, but a technical, standardised one. If so, there must also be such an explanation if things are not working well: for a paranoid, there must be a reason why life does not add up or make sense. If ostensibly neutral and indifferent normativity is not working, *it must be because the system is being manipulated in some way*. This is the core idea of the disciplinary paranoiac: there are hidden, partial forces at work which are more fundamental than what *appears* to be happening.

Control impels and modulates (Deleuze: 1995, 178). It calls for constant transformation, innovation, development, and movement. It does not shape the subject into an individual, but makes the subject an inventory of effects and tendencies to be continuously managed and reviewed, like a portfolio-self. However, this is not a completely separate operation from discipline. Control can also be thought of as a phase-shifting moment of feedback in a disciplinary system, the point at which the paranoia induced by discipline calls for some operation of negative entropy to prevent disciplinary societies from falling apart completely. However, this does not happen without the system as a whole changing: the normative image is still operative, but no longer as a point of convergence and standardisation; rather it now calls for divergence, for moving away, and for being different and diverse. Rather than finding one's correct place, coordinated to relatively stable normative images, the subject of control is in a modulating circuit of constant comparison, where they try to influence the temporary (yet relevant) images through competitionⁱⁱ with others. This is why communication systems are so important under control: one's success is dependent upon circulating and competitive images and, the more one circulates, the more relevant one becomes (at least for the time being). In this, the most banal aspects of life are potential images for circulation – everything is available for networking. Here, Mathiesen's critique of Foucault becomes relevant: the panopticon enters into conjunction with the synopticon, the few seen by the many (Mathiesen: 1997), as a privilege to be competitively fought over. Exceptionality, as a matter of circulation and communication.

What is the image of authority under control, at least in the West? It is not the authorisation of dispersed normative centres, but the image of distribution itself, of movement and innovation (Moore: 2013). In this sense, it is the authority of universal competition.ⁱⁱⁱ A paranoid would then be influenced by the suspicion that there is, in fact, no underlying normative structure at all: nothing essential is shareable or to be shared; rather, there is not only an outright battle for prestige and exceptionality but, in this, also the realisation of sheer contingency and, for the 'winners' at least, a brittle and defensive faith that the most arbitrary outcome must be the most just one (i.e. undistorted competitive 'markets'^{iv}). In this, the illusion can be paradoxically fostered that one has

overcome contingency and randomness because of one's inherent exceptionality: I am famous because I deserve to be. The tragic thing, of course, is when the losers subscribe to the same fantasy: that the best have risen to the top; and too, that they (the losers) might have done likewise if it had not been for 'factor X' in their lives. What differentiates such paranoia from the disciplinary paranoiac is the additional move of having to convince oneself that any of this is objectively true; i.e. a paranoid might think to themselves that competition is just, and that they could have been a winner if only 'factor x' had not occurred but, too, they must also convince themselves that, out of sheer contingency, the universal competitive battle *can give sense to the current state of the world*. The control paranoia is to think that the world makes sense, is explainable, and can be narrativized to achieve one's desires – hence the rather misnamed cybernetics. This is the paranoia that control fosters: that we are each on a journey and, whilst any sense of communal progress is now meaningless, we can each arrive at the destiny we deserve – and, if we do not, we can explain this to ourselves (we were blocked in some way from communicating our inherent exceptionality). What makes this paranoia specifically is the insurmountable evidence to the contrary: *good discipline does not lead to just desserts*. In other words, that contingency reigns; meaning: cause and effect no longer provide a sufficiently convincing explanation of what is happening. The image of authority under control is therefore more speedily self-deconstructing than anything under discipline; indeed, the authority of control is rooted in the very operation of deconstructing its own authority: this is how it absorbs all revolutionary tendencies, agrees with its critiques, and *keeps on trying to de-authorise itself* by putting destiny into each of our hands. To deny its meaninglessness would itself be meaningless,^v for what can authority do today except to fail, and to keep on failing?^{vi}

What does the control paranoiac know but not want to know? That their existence is contingent; i.e. that they do not exist out of necessity and, had they not existed at all, their absence would not have been noted; furthermore, from an ontological perspective, any difference in what is because a given subject (or group of subjects) was not, is so negligible as to be irrelevant. The control paranoiac can accept that everyone else's existence is contingent, but not their own. Somehow, they are the exception; because they exist, there is meaning and the fact that the world exists becomes a necessary fact: necessary, as the condition of *their* existence.

Is the key then, to become less paranoid? Unfortunately, this seems unlikely: by what frame of reference could humanity come together so as to authorise actually knowing something about itself? That is, to know something universal about itself beyond the shared spirit of competition? Maybe the solution – and this is evident from Burroughs' own practice (Harris: 2013) - is to become more paranoid, meaning to subject one's anxiety induced paranoia to a further test of paranoia. Meta-para-noia or, even hyper-para-noia? What this could allow is some distance from what is 'actually going on' – not to take command of it, but to situate ourselves relative to it with more clarity; i.e., the point at which clarity and paranoia become the same thing, and we can see the contingency of our existence. To track this, it is useful to follow a certain trajectory, not as the truth of paranoia, but as an attempt to 'know something' about it.

PARANOID WRITING

According to Flusser, writing and history are intimately connected: they fabricate each other. This means, of course, that if we are moving beyond writing, we are also moving beyond the possibility of any history (Flusser: 2011, 56-58). Indeed, we are now in post-history, mainly because of technological developments that make us less and less reliant on writing, and more and more dependent on the 'technical image'.^{vii} The technical image is mobile, private (or, at least, pertinent

only to the appropriate 'bubbles'), and endlessly re-combinable. It is non-linear and so does not unfold *in* time, and has no need to present itself as being either *of* a specific time, nor as operating *with reference to* a particular time. For this reason, it is ahistorical.^{viii} This also means, of course, that it is not only de-centralised, but distributed, modulatory, connectible, specific, temporary, and exclusionary. The latter is so because the authorisation of the technical image is effectively immanent, meaning that it pertains only to the bubble, group, or community to whom it is addressed and who are, in turn, authorised to manipulate it.^{ix} Each bubble is, to use Lyotard's adoption of Wittgenstein, a language-game. Such games become unavoidable, in Lyotard's analysis, precisely because of a failure in generalised legitimation and metanarratives (Lyotard: 1984, 6). This failure is the failure or ending of history as presented by Flusser. However, Lyotard's merit here is to focus on the problem of legitimation (Lyotard: 1998, 6-9). Whilst critical of Habermas, Lyotard nevertheless presupposes a certain level of compatibility between language-games – not in terms of any possible consensus between them (which is now illegitimate) - but, at least, enough that they can be in dispute with each other.^x

However, here we should consider that Lyotard was somewhat over-optimistic. The differend is a practical competitive move for a language-game in a dispute with another language-game. However, it is never – by definition – universally guaranteed, and this means that anyone can take advantage of its means, for 'good' or 'ill'. Today, it is difficult to think of anyone who makes better use of the resources of the differend than the climate change denier. Because there can be no differend applicable to all (no universal language-game), post-history is a mobile and complex network of bubbles/communities that are orientated only to, and by, their own competitiveness. There is nothing between them. Therefore, any dispute is to be resolved by making all competitors losers. In this sense, it is paranoia that founds a community, combined with the means to successfully communicate this paranoia. If communications go hand in hand with paranoia, it is because, as a technical matter, the means of communication refer only to themselves. This is certainly not inevitable, but if 'good' and 'progressive' use is made of communications media, this is only discernible, it seems, by reference to what one has already taken to be a 'good' and 'progressive' language game. By itself, the only demand of communication media is to communicate – and it is a demand. For the subject, the problem of such media is that they can in no way guarantee truthfulness or sincerity (Luhmann: 1995, 150); the best that one can hope for is a compensating communication that assures us that the previous communication was truthful and sincere; but then, of course, yet another such communication is required. Luhmann points out that a constant exclamation of truthfulness and sincerity is liable to produce doubts in the recipient (Luhmann: 1995, 150) – being constantly reassured that the last message was truthful fosters paranoia. As such, the subject is drawn into a process of continuous communication which is less to do with the content of a message, as it is to do with the fact that repeatedly sending a message is indicative of truthfulness and sincerity. What becomes problematic therefore is not what might be in the message,^{xi} but that one stops messaging altogether, or does not message enough. Then, suspicion can also be aroused.

The specific difficulty here – exacerbated by communications media (Luhmann: 1995, 162-163) – is that the information (the 'content' of a communication) must not be confused with the message or utterance that 'contains it' (Luhmann: 1995, 151). However, within the limits of this paper, the only thing that can finally insure against this confusion of utterance and content is authority (legitimacy), because only authority can provide, in advance, the appropriate parameters by which the meaning or sense of a communication can be extracted by the recipient (in Luhmann's terminology: self-reference).^{xii} Lacking legitimation of this sort (something that provides referential orientation for the message), a communication can only legitimate itself through the fact of its own transmission or

circulation. With no such orientating self-reference (available to the recipient) a basic 'rule' of social systematicity is transgressed: "In no way is one allowed to repeat what has already been said ..." (Luhmann: 1995, 64); indeed, one is impelled to communicate precisely because one has nothing new to say – for how is the new to be identified? In which case, the only point of reference is the technical arrangement of the communications media itself. When utterance and information collapse into one another, then it is the network of communications that becomes authoritative. Consequently, the more a message circulates, the more authority it has and the truer it becomes. Lyotard was right that we should be paying much more attention to sophistry.^{xiii}

OBSCENITY

For the paranoid, everything is potentially connected to their own exceptionality. *Therefore*, I should continue with some development of this point and, here, Baudrillard's notion of obscenity becomes useful. In *The Ecstasy of Communication*,^{xiv} Baudrillard is explicit:

Private telematics: each individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his original universe; that is to say, in the same position as the astronaut in his bubble ... (1988, 15)

The control paranoiac confronts an infinite array of data and information, all of which is potentially relevant to him or her. The problem: how to sift through this mass, in order to rank it in some way? How to create sufficient distance when one has become sovereign of (or as) a communicational media node? How to foster the illusion that one is not simply another drop in the data-stream? As Baudrillard indicates, by *seeing oneself* as sovereign. The work demanded of the subject under control is to constantly re-construct themselves, but to do this by making themselves *more themselves* each time, becoming the realisation of that true and special self that they know themselves to be *really*. The reference to sovereignty we should consider – regardless of whether this was Baudrillard's intent or not – in the Schmittian register, as the one who decides on the exception (Schmitt: 2005, Chapter One);^{xv} except that, now, the exception is oneself and so one is called to *decide upon oneself* over and over again. Sovereignty has not disappeared but cloned itself and, in having done so, has been miniaturised and gone viral. Now, we all host the sovereign.

Thus, if Luhmannian self-reference has become suspended, it is because of the hardening of one's own sovereign bubble that seeks more and more closure, but with ever less compensating openness; indeed, this is also the spirit of competition: only open onto what you can takeover; what you can't takeover, ignore or destroy. Otherwise, there is only the vertigo of the obscene, that which cannot be staged or placed, because it does not present the *illusion* of the real but, instead, *the real itself*. This real is not redemptive or revealing, but simply shows the unbearable contingency of one's own being; it is the point at which we cannot distinguish the content of a communication from the articulation of a communication. Not without some irony, obscene control is the loss of the possibility of alienation:

Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication. (Baudrillard: 1988, 21-22)

This immediate transparency, the closeness of everything, creates a thin surface, as if one were situated looking at the inside of a bubble's skin that, in its proximity, is so visible as to become meaningless – i.e. non-differentiated, equivalent, and without-affect: "Obscenity lies in the fact that there is nothing to see" (Baudrillard: 1988, 31). If so, what is perhaps truly disturbing about images

of violence and terror – from 9/11 to police killings – is not what they show or represent (after all, such violence is known to be endemic), but that the images reproduce and become unavoidable. This is not a criticism, but the recognition of a (possible) politics that derives from the logic of obscenity, rather than the revelation of a secret.^{xvi}

However, the point here is: how to prioritise oneself when one knows oneself to be a clone? By insisting upon the right to be at the centre of things: in this way, from the mass of meaningless communication by which we are impelled, we might portfolio ourselves, arbitrarily collect and juxtapose this or that image, cut-up and re-arrange, play – as Flusser has it (not without some regret) - with the technical image. Then, we can carry out the work of dividualising ourselves. That there is apparently ‘no alternative’ is the only legitimisation we have and its immediate consequence, of course, is to legitimise all alternatives (facts and realities alike) *necessarily and unavoidably by reference to oneself*. However, this is not a divided or split self, a self that must bend back around to itself but, rather, the most basic globule of living matter, the barest of selves, a self that is immediately and obscenely real, and so non-referable and consequently exceptional and one of a kind. To reach this point, to have faith in oneself when faith is no longer possible, is the work of control.

There is a closeness here to the Lacanain mirror stage (Lacan: 2006), in which the co-ordination of the human body is learnt mimetically and a sense of self-agency comes to be operative. All agents are, for this reason, paranoid (Lacan: 2006, 77). However, the question with mimesis is always to do with how the image to be copied is selected. How to recognise that something out there is in fact me? At the same time – and perhaps more importantly - how is it that what is perceived as *all me already* can have this gap opened up in the midst of it, the space where I will encounter the other? The mirror creates a space for the subject (Lacan: 2006, 77), through which they can link to “socially elaborated situations” (Lacan: 2006, 79). One thinks, of course, of the Latah (Burroughs: 1993) mindlessly copying in fine detail the acts and movements of others, a mimetic automaton who is not able to resist immediately acting out whatever they happen to see. This is the perfect illustration of the bubble-self: with no ability to distinguish images, or to extract meaning from communications, nothing remains to be done except to mirror the image and to repeat the communication, to pass it on. This is already clear from Lacan: it is we ourselves who are the mirrors. The difference between discipline and control at this point is that, with the former, we look at the reflected self but, with the latter, we see the self only in outline and in its absence; it is the images around it which draw our attention. The space of the mirror implodes, making of the subject an ever-decreasing spot or fleck on the screen. This blank spot becomes necessary as the tiniest distance, the fraction of space that must be kept open if we are not to be totally consumed by obscenity: “...the subject’s capture by his situation gives us the most general formulation of madness...” (Lacan: 2006, 80). Perhaps the ‘selfie’ is the last line of defence against total immersion ...?

The idea that obscenity is something shocking or provocative is hard to maintain. This does not mean that an *image* of shock and outrage cannot be circulated – ‘members of the public’ reflect it all the time in news broadcasts when asked for their opinion – and, in this, flashing moments of authoritativeness can pass by because, in obscenity, only the miming out of our horror and concern seems able to provide such scintillations. Was *Naked Lunch* ever intended as a *shocking* work? No, the point of its obscenity was to show how close the obscene has now come - the collapse of reference and authority precipitating the absorption of the meat of existence into the filaments and cables of communication.

But ... all of this – this is what a paranoid person would think, right? That Burroughs saw *Naked Lunch* as a satirical work is well known, and exaggeration is obviously one of its tools. Similarly with

Baudrillard in his ecstasy of pessimism, a writer whose works certainly become more prescient as time passes but who yet *still remains readable*. So, perhaps the proper formulation of paranoia at this point is to say: there are only seconds to go. What might this mean?

COMPETITION

It would be interesting to undertake an analysis of why certain communicated images take on a specific force at a given time. It cannot just be because they are horrific in their violence and cruelty, because such images abound. The hyper-cynical Baudrillardian line might be to say that the *illusion of affect* has to be maintained if we are to keep deluding ourselves that something like community is possible. Without wishing to propose anything exceptional about humanity it does seem, at least, that we have a certain specificity. Our histories are, of course, the rich and bloody narratives of what that specificity might be and, to borrow from Nancy, here we find a commonality: that what we have in common is that we have nothing in common (Nancy: 1991, 15). Diverging slightly from Nancy, I would prefer to say that what we have in common is our exposure to contingency; that we do not exist by necessity as individuals or as a species and that, in this fragility, we find an existential sharing. However, this is not a sharing of content and meanings, of beliefs or enjoyments, of gods and monsters. What is shared is our incapacity to share these things. This is the exposure to contingency, evident in images of violence that, for whatever contextual reasons, many of us can suddenly perceive and feel something about when we encounter them. This feeling, I suggest, is the sudden awareness that our paranoia is *correct and truthful* – that we do indeed know something about what is going on - and so take offence at those who would deny it for their own ends. That is: we become authorised by our paranoia.

At such a point, we move from an existential paranoia to a political one. We are faced with something intolerable at that point, feeling the vertigo of what we know but don't want to know: that the contingency of our existence is being used to authorise the misery, murder, mutilation, suffering, degradation, depression, illness, ignorance, etc. of others with whom we have in common the lack of any reason to be. Given that, it might be asked: 'who cares, so long as it is not me?' Perhaps such a question is difficult to answer historically, but an advantage we have today is that the emptiness of such a position is fully apparent. That is because, on moving from the existential to the political we now re-find the existential. The lesson of biopolitics: today, politics is directly concerned with the existential fragility of our being (that is, our being without necessity). This means that we must turn our paranoia to good use.

Such a strategy is clear in many of Burroughs' writings, particularly during his time in London from 1967-1974. As Oliver Harris notes in his introduction to *The Soft Machine*, such a method was not without its dangers, being liable to stimulate the most banal and vicious reactions in its subject (in Burroughs' case as expressions of anti-Semitism and misogyny (Harris: 2014, xxvi)). However, valuable and practical insights were also obtained, and reported by Burroughs in works such as *The Third Mind* (with Brion Gysin), *Electronic Revolution*, *Ah Pook is Here*, and others. In particular, Burroughs' experiments with paranoia led him to discover the operation of what he called control – this term being subsequently adopted by Deleuze in 1990, with explicit reference to Burroughs' work. In *The Third Mind*, for example, Burroughs explains the cut-up method, encouraging his readership to utilise it for themselves; the purpose being to create some distance from what was otherwise obscenely proximate - the pre-recorded images and words distributed across lines of association, serving as flow charts through which the subject could 'navigate' their own lives and biographies. The cut-up disrupted these lines, showing their workings and, too, allowed for the

possibility of counter-lines to be developed - new juxtapositions of word and image, through which new subjectivities might emerge alongside novel assemblages of time and space.

This raises the question of feedback (Moore: 2007), as Burroughs outlines in his short essay 'The Limits of Control':

Consider ... the impasse implicit here. All control systems try to make control as tight as possible, but at the same time, if they succeeded completely, there would be nothing left to control. (1993b, 117)

At the same time, control is a type of addiction (Burroughs: 1993b, 118-119) – the more control one has, the less margin *for* control one has, and so more situations susceptible to control are required. The feedback problem is: control needs what is out of control to function. Therefore, for those interested in resisting control, paranoia is needed in relation to both control and what presents as 'out of control'. Burroughs himself does not quite make this leap, because he remains wedded to the idea that the problem of control is also the problem of the state (Burroughs: 1993b, 120-121); we might say that he wasn't paranoid enough in this instance. *Electronic Revolution* goes further, because it addresses the problem of feedback in a more detailed way: how to disrupt feedback systems? How to foster positive feedback, at the expense of negative feedback? In the context of that essay, by using the (then current) methods of communication against the system of communications (as a sort of lived cut-up), where playback of the sounds of riot, war, and resistance might be used to induce actual riot, war, and resistance.^{xvii} However, even this (positive feedback) calls for caution today.^{xviii} Is it possible to cut into both discipline and control, to fashion a new strategy? Can we become more creatively paranoid?

What can we take from discipline? The paranoia that secret forces are at work. What can we take from control? The paranoia that we will have to confront our own contingency. Is there a certain denudement possible if we can assemble these together? Are secret forces at work that do not want us to confront our (and their) contingency? This is not the strategy of a strongly juridical image, that asserts continuity and inevitability as the ground of its command and which must, in turn, be resisted (for example, by 'breaking out' into an outside); rather, it would be to become paranoid about everyone and everything that claims to want to 'free us', to 'return us' to a natural state, that wants us to 'realise our potential'. In short, it would be to become suspicious of both the fact and 'advantages' of de-authorisation, deregulation, equality of opportunity, and so on ... to become suspicious of competition.^{xix}

What then of competition? Taking off from Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Dardot and Laval have constructed a genealogy of (neo)liberalism that shows competition to be at the core of contemporary governmentality and administration. More than this, even: that competition is now constitutive of neo-liberal subjectivities – which echoes the idea of 'dividuality' as outlined by Deleuze. The crucial feature of competition, as a sociological arrangement, is its acceptance of inequality – not merely as an unfortunate outcome from the game of 'equality of opportunity', but as the very basis and condition of the game in the first place (Dardot & Laval: 2013, 83).

Competition needs asymmetry, disequilibrium, movement and circulation to function. What is its function? Unsurprisingly, this question is shown, by Dardot and Laval, to have been grasped by the proponents of competition as being a moral one. Hence, with reference to Herbert Spencer, they write that competition between individuals was understood as the "very principle of the progress of humanity" (Dardot & Laval: 2013, 34), and that, "assimilation of economic competition to a general struggle for existence must be allowed to develop so as not to arrest evolution" (Dardot & Laval: 2013, 34).

Implicit in this is the same feedback problem faced by control: there must be a bottom tier of 'losers' (those unfit to survive) who will necessarily be allowed to die or, at least, be left to lead alienated lives so that competitive progress can proceed. The progress of some requires the de-progressing of others. Therefore, it will be necessary to de-progress more and more humans as the regime unfolds. In the midst of knowledge and plenty, it will be necessary to create scarcity and ignorance (Deleuze & Guattari: 2013, Part 3).

During the course of the mid-20th Century, a seemingly more human face was put on the tenet of competition, inasmuch as it was thought^{xx} that the latter would lead to a more just society through enabling more personal (i.e. private) liberty – such liberty being both guaranteed by, and directed towards, competitive relations amongst individuals. As Dardot and Laval are careful to explain, this should not be thought of as an embrace of *lassiez faire* economics – on the contrary, the respective proponents of this newer vision of competition grasped that it was not a *naturally occurring consequence* of 'free' markets: a lack of state intervention would likely lead to uncompetitive practices such as monopolies (Dardot & Laval: 2013, Chapter 2). It was understood that the 'communal' resources of the state should be targeted on making competition the central principle for *all* aspects of human life – not (of course) to achieve equality, but rather 'liberty' for all (Dardot & Laval: 2013, 65-66).

If this leads to a new vision of the competitive life as being the most fulfilling life (an idea that still has currency today, even amongst progressive thinkers), then the contemporary moment is marked by the realisation that, at a certain point, neo-liberalism must come into conflict with democracy, because the latter places a seemingly arbitrary limit upon the competitive freedom of the neoliberal subject (Dardot & Laval: 2013; Chapter 9 and Conclusion). In which case, the use of state intervention, alongside the proper educating of humanity, becomes geared towards allowing for the most successfully competitive strata to break away from the rest of society. Indeed, at such a point, the very notion of society will have become non-sensical: for the highest strata there is only "the tyranny of the majority" (Dardot & Laval: 2013, 306), an obscene exposure from which they must continuously free themselves if they are to fully pursue the competitive tendencies of which they are capable.

How can paranoia help us at this point? First, a new type of secret has become operational: not the state secret (the revelation of which often actually helps to conceal this new type secret) but the secret of active disinformation: the use of doubt, lies, distraction, alternative facts, and misdirection to conceal the fact that the top competitive strata – the 1% - have ceded from the rest of society. The purpose of any remaining social or communal resources is then to be utilised in concealing the fact that the 1% have withdrawn. The primary method of secrecy here is not to hide things away, but to randomise their significance. The most obvious example is, of course, climate change denial. This involves the exploitation of communications networks to de-authorise any consensus being drawn on the controversy. Nevertheless, if consensus remains ostensibly possible here, it is because what is at stake is not a question of *how* we should live but, rather, a question as to whether we shall live at all. The primary means of concealment is to keep any and all controversies open.

Second, following from this, we must become aware that the 1% are encouraging us to doubt all institutional, state, and collective forms to the extent that these might be viable methods for curtailing their liberty. Of significance here is the obscenity of reality: the proximity of the communicational technical image is no longer a matter of nudging us towards the correct normative standards, but instead is mobilised to emphasise the arbitrariness of such standards, so that all response or action seems equally arbitrary and disconnected as a consequence. In other words, if

we are being guided, it is to make us turn away from communal institutional resources, and into our own competitive subject/community bubbles. We have become trapped in liberty.

Third, we must become aware of wanting to not face our own non-necessity. The 1% have already grasped this, and have decided to act on it: if no human life is necessary, they will do all they can to foster *their* human lives. Our paranoid refusal of the contingency of existence is being used against us (e.g. with promises of human rights, diversity, that we are all important, that we must not suffer, etc., etc.). The point is not to fall into a deathly competition of all against all, but to realise that we *all lack necessity*. Therefore, the advantages enjoyed by the 1% (or any other percentage) cannot be justified on any ethical or philosophical basis. Here, a task remains outstanding: how to think community beyond the opposition of liberty and equality (i.e. non-competitively).

Clearly, there are only seconds to go. The super-rich – the 1% - are already making plans for their survival in the face of worldwide calamities,^{xxi} of which Covid-19 is likely only the relatively benign harbinger. We should be clear and paranoid: this is not a ‘natural’ survival instinct which just happens to be able to draw on vast resources; this is the deployment of vast resources to make sure that the majority of us – the 99% - are wiped out and, if not wiped out, at least rendered containable. Bruno Latour has made a similar point in his recent *Down to Earth* (2018, 18-21). In the full expectation of impending global catastrophe, the 1% have dismissed any idea of solidarity – they are not with us, and their cause is not our cause: “These people ... understood that, if they wanted to survive in comfort, *they had to stop pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world*” (Latour: 2018, 19. Emphasis in the original). Latour suggests that a co-ordinated effort is now being undertaken to extract and stockpile whatever resources still remain whilst, simultaneously, through a Baudrillardian ecstasy of communication, confusing the rest of us as to what is actually going on. If we can no longer rely on authorised truth, and if we refuse the bubble of bespoke alternative facts, then the only course open to us is paranoia – that we nevertheless have some idea of what is going on. In an endnote, Latour writes:

The problem with conspiracy theories, as Luc Boltanski has shown, is that they sometimes correspond all too well to reality. (Latour: 2018, 113, n.21)

Unfortunately, Latour’s self-professed naivete in matters of political science is evident throughout the rest of his short book. He proposes that the solution might be for all of us to insist, modestly, on belonging somewhere. But, if we humans belonged anywhere, there would be no scope for paranoia at all and, even more so, all political philosophy would be redundant. No, the problem is that humanity has never belonged, not on this planet nor anywhere else; and it is because we don’t belong that we must insist that we are not going anywhere. As a first practical step, simply: tax the rich. Tax them for Black Lives Matter, for victims of domestic abuse, and for refugee children. Tax them for shit jobs, no future, and for the fostering of an infantilised culture. Trickle-down doesn’t work and we don’t want the precarity they’re offering. Tax the rich. Tax them for a lifetime of debt, for slashed wrists, and hostile environments. Tax them for murder, torture, and rape. Tax them for every desperate person who drowned in the Mediterranean and in the English Channel. Tax the rich. Tax them for the time they have stolen from those yet to be born...

Nothing has changed except that now, there are only seconds to go:

Pay it all pay it all pay it *all* back. (Burroughs: 2013, 2)

CONCLUSION

Facing up to contingency means developing an acceptance of the capacity for human extinction.^{xxii} We are not owed anything, so how we live always remains to be constructed. Historically, the trend has been to construct human life as if it were not contingent, as if it were exceptional because of its sacrifices, its gods, its wars, its suffering, its productivity. We know well the discrimination this has produced – but the solution is not (only) to carry on in the competitive struggle for ways of life, in the belief that any of them can offer a permanent foundation or existential guarantee. Rather, the problem is to find ways to think our universal exposure to contingency and, in light of this, to find new ways to live. To stress, this is not because we deserve anything at all, but that through the condition of contingency a creative capacity is continuously open. It is this which must be taken back from our masters – as inevitably, they are masters without any mastery at all.

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ⁱ Because a norm will always need to be affirmed by yet another norm.

ⁱⁱ On competition, see Chapters 2 & 3 of Dardot & Laval: 2013 and Foucault: 2010, 118 *et seq*

ⁱⁱⁱ That is, in its most 'benign' formations. Achille Mbembe has shown how, in terms of contemporary colonisations, the interplay of what I am here referring to as discipline and control operates in a much more overtly exclusionary manner, with tight, bespoke, and mobile zones of discipline being flexibly coordinated and controlled to make bodies remove themselves. See his references to South Africa and Palestine in his famous essay 'Necropolitics' (Mbembe: 2013, 173-177). On the auto-removal of bodies, see too my 'Diagramming Control' (Moore: 2013).

^{iv} Of course, it takes a lot of intervention to make markets apparently undistorted. Also relevant here is a line repeated in *Naked Lunch*: as one judge said to another be just, and if you can't be just, be arbitrary (Burroughs: 1993)

^v Again, Mbembe is helpful here, for showing how this results in a necropolitics of survival, which is of course intimately tied to universal competition. Indeed, the very logic of competition is victimising, in the sense that there can only be winners if there are losers or, more accurately, one wins *because someone else has lost* (Mbembe: 2013, p.182). In a different context, the conjunction of paranoia and narrativization (usually in the form of a play) are constant themes in the films of Jacques Rivette. See, for example, *Paris nous appartient* (1961) or the epic *Out 1* (1970), where the feeling that a causality is at work, but beyond the comprehension of many of the films' protagonists, is palpable.

^{vi} For more on this theme, see (Diamantides & Schütz: 2017, Chapter 4)

^{vii} Of course, Flusser points out that post-history was already contained in history proper as the most likely outcome, given the contradictions within history (and writing) itself (Flusser: 2011, 8-9). Now that the accident of technology has arrived at a particular point of development and availability, those contradictions can come to the fore, radically transforming the image of authority.

^{viii} Unlike well-known others, Flusser did not see this as an immediate cause for celebration (Flusser: 2011, 87-94).

^{ix} Here, a certain habit of language is evident. Manipulation in this context should not be taken to indicate mastery. In this context, mastery is a meaningless proposition, and both the image and its handlers are caught up in a reciprocally constituting relation – one that is, within its own terms, not only fully cognisant of this fact, but is also dependent for its operation upon this malleability being 'easily' available to the relevant subjects.

^x It is difficult to avoid a Schmittian implication here, in terms of *hostis*: an enemy that one recognises as being sufficiently like oneself that the prospect of peace or an accord remains possible. In distinction, the enemy who has forfeited their 'human rights' can only be eradicated (Schmitt: 1996, 28).

^{xi} A provocative thought: could trolling be an attempt to give some meaning back to the *content* of communications? If so it would, of course, suggest an extreme assumption of exceptionality by the sender.

^{xii} See (Luhmann: 1995, 32-41). If I can refer to self-reference as a legitimating authority in this context, it is because both function as *augere*, that is as necessary elements in the process for the augmentation of what exists (or, at least, of what is taken to exist by the system in question). Although a slight digression, a Luhmannian definition of paranoia can then be proposed, extrapolated from his discussion of information and meaning in (Luhmann: 1995, 65): for a paranoid, information remains new no matter how often it is encountered. That is, information never augments a system which is, for the paranoid, already fully what it is.

^{xiii} The attempt by a philosopher such as Badiou to re-draw a clear distinction between philosophy and sophistry seems, in this regard, a bit naively utopia (see, for example, the sustained differentiation of philosophy and anti-philosophy in Badiou: 1999). On sophistry and rhetoric see, generally, (Crome: 2004)

^{xiv} See too (Baudrillard: 1990, 50-70)

^{xv} For the important connection of exceptionality with immunity, see (Esposito: 2011, pp. 66-74)

^{xvi} It is difficult to gauge the impact of someone like Edward Snowden for example; but it seems that the public at large were not too concerned to find out what various governments were really up to. From a Baudrillardian perspective it might be because today, we already know that *they* are up to no-good, hence we are bored by secrets and their revelation to the extent that these pertain to some sense of a *shared* reality ... but we can each be impelled by obscenities if the communicational circumstances are right.

^{xvii} As Baudrillard pointed out: try robbing a bank with a fake gun, and see what happens (Baudrillard: 1983, p.39)

^{xviii} I am thinking here of disaster capitalism – see, generally, (Klein: 2008)

^{xix} It is interesting to note that, in the 2016 edition of their book *Intersectionality*, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge seek to authorise intersectionality in terms of improving competition – through levelling the playing field, and giving equality of opportunity to those otherwise excluded from competitiveness (Hill Collins & Bilge: 2016 – see Chapter One in particular). This shows the complexities of the current time, inasmuch as such a justification must be agreed with and supported in practical terms, whilst nevertheless recognising the limits of its theorisation to the extent that it leaves competition in place as something essential.

^{xx} See Dardot and Laval's discussion of the Walter Lippman Colloquium and German Ordo-liberalism, in chapters two and three respectively of *The New Way of the World* (Dardot & Laval: 2013).

^{xxi} See for example: Paypal co-founder Peter Thiel's investments in seasteading

https://www.seasteading.org/about/?gclid=EAlaIqObChMltfvu4vuS6wIV2-7tCh2Z4Ah9EAAYASAAEgJGJfD_BwE;

the use of 'disaster bunkers' during the current pandemic

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/disease-dodging-worried-wealthy-jet-off-to-disaster-bunkers>;

the setting up of fortress communities and super-rich militias

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich> (note the link drawn

between this paranoia and communications technology); billionaire 'preppers' buying up swathes of remote

real estate <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/realestate/super-rich-sanctuaries-to-survive-global-disasters/ss-BB1364s7#interstitial=2>; and so on. All accessed 11 August 2020.

^{xxii} On the contingency/extinction of human existence, see, generally, Brassier (2007) and Meillassoux (2008)