

# Panic, War & Semio-Kapital

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Globalisation stands reframed in the dark light of the global war. This means we need to reconceptualise the change that is taking place in the social, economic and anthropological form of globalisation. During the past two centuries, global control was the general techno-utopia of capitalist society and modern culture. Now, the time of global control is over. We are completely out of this framework today. The new governing framework of capitalism is global panic. If we want to understand what panic means we have to talk about the 'attention economy' and about 'digital labour'. This is where the source of contemporary panic is, in the organisation of time in the digital sphere, in the relationship between cyberspace and cybertime.

What is panic? We are told that psychiatrists have recently discovered and named a new kind of disorder – they call it "Panic Syndrome". It seems that a widespread form of panic, of "Panic Syndrome", is something quite recent in the psychological self-perception of human beings. But what does panic mean?

Once, 'panic' used to be a nice word, and this is the sense in which the Swiss-American psychoanalyst James Hillman remembers it in his book on Pan. Pan used to be the god of nature, the god of totality. In Greek mythology Pan was the symbol of the relationship between man and nature.

Nature is the overwhelming flow of reality, things and information that we are surrounded by. Modern culture is based on the idea of human domination, of the domestication of nature. So the original panic feeling, which was something good for the ancient world, is becoming increasingly terrifying and destructive. Today, panic has become a form of psychopathology. We can speak of panic when we see a conscious organism (individual or social) being overwhelmed by the speed of processes he/she/it is involved in, and has no time to process the information input. In these cases the organism, all of a sudden, is no more able to process the sheer amount of information coming into its cognitive field, or even that which is being generated by the organism itself.

Technological transformations have displaced the focus of the capitalist form of the organisation of labour from the sphere of the production of material goods towards the Info-sphere, the sphere of semiological goods. With this, Semio-Kapital becomes the general form of the economy. The accelerated creation of surplus value depends on the acceleration of the Info-sphere. The digitalisation of the Info-sphere opens the road to this kind of

acceleration. Signs are produced and circulated at a growing speed but the human terminal of the system (the embodied mind) is put under growing pressure, and finally it cracks under pressure. I think that the current economic crisis has something to do with this imbalance in the field of semio-production and in the field of semio-demand. This imbalance in the relationship between the supply of semiotic goods and the socially available time of attention is the core of the economic crisis as well as the core of the intellectual and the political crises that we are living through now.

We can describe this situation in terms of the relationship between cyberspace and cybertime. Cyberspace is the infinite productivity of collective intelligence in a networked dimension. The potency of the general intellect is enormously enhanced when a huge number of points enter into connections with each other thanks to the telematic network. Consequently, info-production is able to create an infinite supply of mental and intellectual goods. But while cyberspace is conceptually infinite, cybertime is not infinite at all. I call cybertime the ability of the conscious organism to actually process (cyberspatial) information. This ability cannot be indefinitely expanded, because it has limits that are physical, emotional, affective. The relationship between infinite expansion of cyberspace and limited capability of processing of cybertime becomes, in my opinion, the most important problem in the present capitalist crisis.

During the last year we have been witness to a sort of telecom-crash. Telecom corporations have invested a huge amount of money in order to buy the frequencies of the UMTS (Universal Mobile Telecommunications System). Huge amounts of money have also been invested in the creation of technical infrastructures like the fibre-optic cable network. But all this is not actually in use. According to the *Financial Times* (6 September 2001, "Information Glut"), only 2.5% of the existing network of fibre-optic cable is being utilised. The rest is dark fibre. In the same issue of the *Financial Times* we learn that only 3% of the capability of the telephone system all over the world is actually used.

So, what can we make of this?

We could remember that Karl Marx had once expressed the concept of an 'overproduction crisis'. You know what this means. You have an overproduction crisis when the machinery and the labour of workers produce an amount of goods that the market cannot absorb. During the history of the industrial system the overproduction crisis was recurrent, and capitalism was pushed to destroy goods, destroy productive capacity, and also destroy human lives, in order to overcome this kind of economic crises.

What is going to happen now? Should we see a relationship between this big imbalance and the war that is raging and obscuring the horizon of the world?

Let's go back to the concept of panic.

Semio-Kapital is in a crisis of overproduction, but the form of this crisis is not only economic, but also psychopathological. Semio-Kapital, in fact, is not about the production of material goods, but about the production of psychic stimulation. The mental environment is saturated by signs that create a sort of continuous excitation, a permanent electrocution, which leads the individual mind as well as the collective mind to a state of collapse.

The problem of panic is generally connected with the management of time. But we can also see a spatial side to panic. During the past centuries, the building of the modern urban

environment used to be dependent on the rationalist plan of the political city. The economic dictatorship of the last few decades has accelerated the urban expansion. The interaction between cyberspatial sprawl and urban physical environment has destroyed the rationalist organisation of the space.

In the intersection of information and urban space we see the proliferation of a chaotic sprawl following no rule, no plan, dictated by the sole logic of economic interest. Urban panic is caused by the perception of this sprawl and this proliferation of metropolitan experience. In modern times, at least since the Italian Renaissance, urban space used to be built on the image of *kosmos* (*kosmos* is 'order' in Greek). Now, we are experiencing a proliferation of spatial *lignes de fuite* (lines of flight), and the social organism feels lost in space, unable to process the overwhelmingly complex experience of metropolitan chaos.

The metropolis is a surfeit of complexity in the territorial domain. The proliferation of lines of communication has created a new kind of chaotic perception. In their book *Attention Economy*, Davenport and Bleick say that the central problem of the cognitive worker, and generally of people who are living in hyper-saturated informational environments, is this: we have no more time for attention, we are no more able to understand and process information input because our time is saturated by a flow of hyper-information.

We don't have time for attention in the workplace. We are forced to process far too large amounts of information and our body-mind is completely taken by this. And further, we have no time for affection, for communication, for erotic relationships. We have no more time for that spatial kind of attention that means attention to the body – to our body, to the body of the other. So, more and more, we feel that we have run out of time, that we must accelerate. And we feel simultaneously that acceleration leads to a loss of life, of pleasure and of understanding.

This collapse in the relationship between cyberspace and cybertime may also be seen as the special feature of the current political situation. The world is rushing into a global war whose reasons are not clear, whose limits are not known. Some are speaking of a long lasting war, possibly an infinite war.

Nonsense? Yes, Nonsense. But at the same time, this nonsensical war is the most alarming symptom of the panic syndrome.

Collin Powell, some days after 9/11, spoke about the rumours that the intelligence services had received some information about bombings and hijackings of airplanes before September 11<sup>th</sup>.

"Yes, it's true", he said, "Yes, it's true, we have received information about something like this, we have received information about bombings and so on. But we always receive lots of information we are not able to process or even to see. We had too much of it, this is the problem. We have too much of information".

This is precisely the effect of info-saturation, which is the consequence of the unbounded expansion of cyberspace. So, the panic I spoke of is becoming social panic, and we are entering a phase which seems to me the phase of panic war.

On one hand, war is a way by which Capital deals with the economic problems of over-production. But thanks to the war, technological production attains a new dimension, and capital can be invested in weapons and tools for security, security and even more security.

On the other hand war is made inevitable by the mental confusion of the ruling class. They do not understand what is happening because the reality has become too complex and too aggressive. So they react in a primary way. The world's ruling class is overwhelmed by the very complexity of the world they have built for themselves. They are no more able to understand, and to rule in a rational way.

So I see two sides to the war. The first is the classical reaction of the capitalist system to the economic crisis of overproduction. "Capitalism brings war like the cloud brings the tempest", said an old guy called Lenin. Overproduction creates the need for a new kind of use of all these capabilities of production, of the intellectual potencies and the technological infrastructure that lie unused. The militarisation of the general intellect is the main danger we are facing nowadays, the militarisation of the intellectual capacity that has been created by the development of collective intelligence, and supported by the technicalities of the Net.

At the same time, I see another aspect to the panic war. Here I mean the relationship between complexity, rather the over-complexity, of the present world and the pretension of control – i.e. the claim that reality can be reduced to the rules of capitalist economic principles, and the further pretence that a global imperial government can administer a complex world which is escaping both political rule and economic control.

In other words, the relationship between 'economic' regulations and infinite production, or productivity, of networked intelligence – this is the problem.

Deleuze and Guattari talk about chaos in *Qu'est-ce que c'est la philosophie*, saying that chaos occurs when the world goes too fast for your brain. This is chaos. So, the problem is in the relationship between the brain and the world, between cybertime and cyberspace.

But the problem, first of all politically, is in the attempt to govern or rule this relationship. If we pretend to be able, like capitalism wants us to do, to control the infinite productivity of networked intelligence, we enter panic world, in panic mode.

But you know, I have good news for all of us. The liberal dictatorship on the one hand, and its twin, religious fundamentalism, de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, are launching a suicidal war. It seems that the father of Osama bin Laden and the father of the president George Bush (Jr.) are old friends. So goes the story. This is the end. This is the end of the neo-liberal dictatorship. You know, when a giant is too strong to be beaten by someone, there is only one way to beat the giant: to pit the strength of the giant against the giant himself. This is what they are doing (to themselves). Hallelujah!

And now we have the problem of what needs to be done. It's a political problem that we are facing, and it's a problem of self-representation of mental work, of general intellect.

What is to be done? I would say that we should transform the global war into a process of general secession of intellectual, of intelligent work.

First of all, we have to launch the global movement that began from Seattle, from Genoa, onto a new phase. We have to direct this movement against the militarisation of mental work.

Secondly, we have to destroy the rule of the general connection between different affective and social strata of intellectual work. We have to break the rule and the war. This war, the panic war, is creating the conditions for a successful move in this direction.