

Pay Attention to “This”: Political Iconomy, Spectacular Modernities and the Normativity of Attention Capital

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I

Contemporary capitalism is characterized by convergent processes of financialization, spectacularization and deregulation. Neoliberal market-led policies, ultraindividualism and new forms of State violence and exception are its corresponding practices leveraged by digital infrastructures for surveillance, cyberwar and counterterrorism. The prominent role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to the creation of neologisms or new research programs such as “knowledge society”, “creative industries” and “information economy”, as well as innovative buzzwords such as “wikinomics” or “freaknomics”. The growing importance of services, intangible assets and new intellectual property regimes (such as “creative commons”) has also implied a rising influence of “soft power” or even “soft innovation” as culture and cultural industries, aesthetics, creativity and the creative industries seem to cluster into a new core for a both sectoral and general intelligence of capital accumulation.

The present challenge is to face the complex interweaving of these convergent tendencies between marketing, technology and violence. States exert now preemptive exception as a norm, while organized crime mirrors this anomaly providing both an escape for the insufficiency of employment opportunities and a spectacular horizon for the vacuity of social or non-governmental organizations. Street demonstrations still float in a misty and unbounded space between civic disobedience and anarchic unrest. But rebellions and riots will not by necessity lead to revolution or emancipation.

Innovation, sustainability and education have come to the fore as the standard, out-of-the-shelf targets for both public and private investments, so that the lack thereof has been indicated both as a source of crises and as the ultimate hope for the overcoming of social disorder and corporate failure.

While it is too soon for a definite prognosis of the evolution of this spectacular/speculative capitalism as a new accumulation regime or even for the thorough design of public policies and regulation challenges, the Post-Fordism framework has nonetheless inspired ambitious research programs on the emergence of new paradigms that aim to surpass the classical political economy bias towards the materiality of labor and physical inputs while also acknowledging the irrelevance of the utilitarian rationale that constitutes the bulk of rational economics and expectations.

Habermas (*Technique and Science as "Ideology"*, 1970) stressed as soon as the late 60s the growing importance of science and technology in the evolution of industrial production as new forces of production in late capitalism shaped communicative action, Boltanski, Chiapello (*The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 2005) also stressed the emergence of a "society of projects" which integrated the aesthetics of a critical perspective into the workings of capital accumulation. The status of ideology for the leveraging of a new global order also became clear as the dollar floated and financialization reigned in. Deregulation followed as the last bastions of Keynesian regulation were disbanded, unionized labor was fragilized and welfare policies disengaged.

Capital accumulation was to be supposedly sustained and accelerated as long as the intelligence of production cycles could be mastered and exponentiated by telematics, cybernetics and informatics. An unprecedented degree of convergence between techniques of territorial, political and economic concentration and ideological domination came to the fore, confirming Debord's vision of capital accumulation as the hypostasis of **value as image**.

Labor theory of value could not cope with this hyperfinancialization of capital at a global scale, inasmuch as workers became growingly entangled and dependent on communicative elements that are not economically measurable in a trivial or transparent fashion. Market value of goods, services and companies, customer fidelity levels, workers "creative" commitment to quality control processes and a new biopolitics of digital bodies are symbolically produced.

Beyond the obvious importance of advertisement, credibility engineering and agenda setting for the image of companies, products, services and workers, the key flows of trust, confidence and solidarity were to become

“liquefied” (Zygmunt Bauman) while the language of commoditization and consumer fetishism became a global *lingua franca*. The crux of this epochal change, however, its grammar, must be traced to its iconic implication: the dollarization of contracts, a gigantic monetary failure that burst into nothingness as the real estate bubble crashed the US economy in 2008. The violence of money, an underlying factor for the Post-War reconstruction of capitalist societies, plagued each and every economy so as to create an unprecedented risk of geopolitical disarray, military violence and civic despair.

II

The extremely imagetic nature of contemporary capitalist development can be associated to one of Habermas’ most recent diagnoses of the public sphere as integral to the *iconic turn*, a successor to the linguistic turn in philosophy. Television and internet have accelerated this process, further concentrating (Castels, 2005) while also fragmenting what has actually become a *spectacular public sphere*.

According to Habermas, the transformation of rationality by mass media and ICTs has transformed the public sphere itself, cognitively associated to image production and accumulation as requisites for voice and action. In this context, the public spaces formed within the economic sphere become less focused in “words” and “discussion”, and more on “image” and “icon”. (Habermas, *Chaos in the Public Sphere*, 2006).

These transformations are to be interpreted as interferences on the claim to self-representation with other normative claims, in other words, as interferences of the logic of culture, arts and self-expression in the spheres of economy and politics.

But one could also identify the contemporary iconic turn as a renewed prominence of self-representation claims that have always been present *within* the rationalities of spheres both of political economy and moral philosophy, since David Hume and Adam Smith. Either approach will imply radically opposite stakes in the multiple modernities debate.

It is important to stress, in order to clear the way to the value of iconicity, that along with the elements of “image” and “icon”, given the connections

between aesthetic and expressive rationalities, psychological and affective elements are also to be brought into consideration.

The effective overcoming of instrumental reason as a requisite for the reconstruction of labor, markets and power as a processes of emancipation leads to an open, ages old and ongoing revision of negativity, rationality and subjectivity. Psychoanalysis, critical theory and philosophical anthropology have been conducive to renewed attempts at the definition of transformative borders for social, economic and political thought and action. Image or, as we prefer to stress, the iconicity of human action, stands at the forefront of this epistemological as well as ideological challenge.

It would take us too far beyond the limits of this paper to fully explore the methodological and practical conditions for this new perspective, which may not fit exclusively into any of the established traditions. It is necessary to revisit the foundations of violence and sympathy, representation and recognition, negativity and abduction. It is not enough to stress new possibilities of a negative dialectic or even of communicative action, economic principles must be repositioned in face of information and communication technologies, effective demand must cope also with affective demand, psychoanalysis meets production engineering and biopolitics forces us into the realms of networked engagement that put subjectivity and sovereignty, norms and exceptions, forms of life and terrorism/security under new light (and shadows).

Suffice it to say that Adam Smith should be revisited after a re-visitation of Sigmund Freud and Donald Winnicott, Karl Marx should be re-read after a critical understanding of John M. Keynes and Ronald Coase, Ferdinand de Saussure would gain from re-opening the intellectual treasuries of Charles S. Peirce and Jacques Lacan. A new research program is needed, one that we refer as a critique of political *iconomy*, so that markets become properly acknowledged as networked actors and the philosophy of consciousness makes room for whatever is beyond the negativity of Otherness. Rationality must be re-framed as we take into consideration the *aggiornamento* of violence and religion in post-industrial, networked and unstable monetary economies.

In short, contemporary capitalism again requires new thinking and political agendas which may take us into a renewed modernity (adding to the

plurality of this concept, thus honoring the legacy of Eisenstadt) rather than to a Post-Modernity without subject nor object, eventually inspired by the nothingness of the empty negation of civilizatory death or even an immersion in the divinatory perspectives opened up by a new faith in “complexity”.

Rather than miring into the uncertainties of “Post-“ or even “In”- human spheres, it may be helpful to resume our understanding of “primitive races” or long past civilizatory processes and transitions, actually the underlying Spenglerian insight that informed Eisenstadt’s contribution to the study of multiple modernities. The ontogenesis of affections could take away more from these inroads as compared to diving into the nothingness erupting from the anomies of *dasein* as we frame our understanding of a much needed transdisciplinary paradigm.

III

Animism, mimetism and playfulness are the three elementals which may inspire our journey into rediscovery of the fundamental building blocks of the contemporary iconomy, this digital alchemy that transforms the very nature of labor exploitation, capital accumulation and technological creative destruction.

Back to Freud, images can be read as the founding interfaces for pulsions and most notably to the pulsions of death. In “Totem and Taboo” (1919), Freud stresses the imagetic nature of animism, insofar as “the observation, it is thought, of the phenomena of sleep (with dreams) and death which resemble sleep, and through the effort to explain these conditions, which affect each individual so intimately” was the pathway of primitive peoples to “the peculiarly dualistic fundamental conceptions on which this animistic system rests”. In short, “very likely discussions have taken place over the part which may have been played by other observations and experiences in the formation of the fundamental animistic conceptions such as dream imagery, shadows and reflections, but these have led to no conclusion”.

From Plato to Lacan, the artifacts of image mirroring in the formation of consciousness have been plagued as sources of trauma, as obstacles to emancipation or as the utmost index of fetishism, illusion and phantasmatism. Marx critique of commoditization as a veil to the inner workings of value creation and human exploitation also point to this blind spot of production and

distribution, the ultimate determinant of the ideological nature of contracts, price systems and the fictitious nature of interest and rent. For this which presents itself as value is nothing beyond the value of appearance.

Freud insisted on the ambivalence of affections as the ground for taboos and also on the relevance of “projecting” inner perceptions to the outside as a primitive mechanism which ultimately regulates violence and power (a “taboo” is etymologically related to both “holy” and “unclean”). It must be stressed that veneration of images is knowingly a taboo in Judaism, so the psychoanalytics of imagery and its relation to death and kinship must play an important role in the creation and destruction of values leveraged by icons, such as money, capital and reputation/sympathy. The demonic nature of taboos was itself founded on the notion that such things/beings/signs should not be touched, that is, they work as rules that must be “observed” (note the proximity of “following” or “observing” the rules and a pictorial theory of the relations between language and world, such as advanced by Ludwig Wittgenstein). To follow or observe implies the ability to repeat infinitely, mentally, thus projecting the outside into the inner workings of human behavior and beliefs (a perversion of the taboo mechanism that may lead to suffering and self-destruction or alienation).

Mimetism is another source of understanding for the issues raised by the iconicity of wealth and value creation, but maybe a non-psychoanalytic approach could be brought into the framework as proposed by Michel Aglietta (*The Violence of Money*) after the ethological approach of René Girard (*Violence and the Sacred*, 1979). It should be stressed that mimesis is another fundamental issue that runs through Western thinking from Plato to Adorno, so that again, we cannot take this trail to its ultimate consequences within the boundaries of this paper. Girard, however, is a timely reference for Aglietta’s regulation approach to the theory of money and financial crises.

For Girard and Aglietta, mimetic rivalry is at the crux of a recurrent challenge to face the animistic projections associated to everyday life experiences such as consumption, investment and sociality which are so often ambiguously traded between sacred and violent, holy and unclean (or non-sustainable, if we update the ambiguity to encompass the “green” revolution).

According to Girard, we “borrow” our desires from others. Our desire is always provoked by the desire of another person or “model”, so that the relationship between the subject and the object is never direct: there is always a triangular relationship of subject, model and object so that any object draws us into this model which is a “mediator”, that is to say, an aspiration, a dream whose completion must be attributed to the mediator (in the event of a crisis, the destruction or sacrifice of the mediator is thus an absolute social requirement, which lays the foundation for Aglietta’s perspective on the violent effects of monetary crises, insofar as currencies are the iconic mediators of value rather than just a value “representation” so that a financial crisis is not only a suspension of the symbolic effectiveness of money but also a failure in our capacity to invest our imagination or project our dreams into things).

The third “elemental” in this emerging critique of political economy is playfulness or the gamicity (or gamification) of social and symbolic processes. Rather than trace rationality back to the autonomy of the self-conscious subject (even in its negative status as the digger or death-aware opener of *dasein*), playfulness (in a sense also an ethological phenomenon as animal toddlers learn to be, fight and match while they play with each other and their parents) is a performative learning practice always open to creative destruction and ritualization (that is, some form of animistic projection of a rules-based space-time that is empirically formed and historically determined).

The developmental psychoanalysis of Donald Winnicott brings the playfulness in the child-mother relationship to the fore as the key factor in culture and civilization. Again, we must face so-called primitive emotional development as a condition for the understanding of advanced, networked, unstable and knowledge-intensive societies rather than look for the phantoms of nothingness of the negative of capital as sources of emancipation. Without properly accounting for Winnicott’s take on playfulness, culture and emancipation, it is noteworthy that he stressed the playfulness, in a sense, of theory-making in itself: “what happens is that I gather this and that, here and there, settle down to clinical experience, form my own theories and then, last of all, interest myself in looking to see where I stole what. Perhaps this is as good a method as any”. The epistemic consequences of playfulness are yet to be

fully integrated into social science and critical theory, but suffice it to say here that playfulness operates “somewhere between objective reality and private fancy, between an abiding faith in the laws of causality and an utter disregard for consequences, between truth and myth, linearity and chaos”. (Abou-Rihan, <http://thepsychoanalyticfield.com/2011/11/12/winnicott-playfulness-thievery/>).

IV

The iconic connections between senses, desires, emotions and rational action lay ground to a critical perspective on the emergence of *attentionality* (rather than *intentionality*) as a core process in the “recreation” of a theory of value, capital accumulation, regulation and morality. This recuperation of playfulness, animism and mimetism as cornerstones of a non-identitary metapsychology of social networks also implies a novel approach to the relations between modernities and recognition, a task that lies ahead both as a research program and as philosophical inquiry into the possibilities of critical theory beyond the assessment of alienation and social despair. In short, beyond instrumental and communicative action, playfulness is at the core of practical discourses of a digitally networked iconomy through and beyond the current global economic crisis. Innovation, branding and public sphere issues could then be retrieved from the buzzword fabrication that now plagues both the right and the left mobilizations of political attention.

The theory of value not as utility or labor, but as icons at play must take affection and pleasure as “différands” beyond the grand theories of the ultimate unity of the Subject, so that the production of pleasure occurs within the surplus value obtained also from the value of material work as long as it becomes a “part maudite” of increasing *visibility* not only *for* consumers but also for citizens, families and non-governmental organizations.

Attentionality then becomes a form of work, a source of value. The fact that the consumer does or does not pay attention to the images and icons is an essential but nonetheless always empirical variable; “paying” attention becomes a requisite for matters relevant to the process of capital accumulation insofar as wealth has become increasingly dependent on our linguistic, communicative but also affective and biopolitical pulsions that may stress behavior beyond norms

and moral values, inviting a recurring openness to the negotiation of any specific exploitation process at play.

The open convergence of capital as accumulation of images and the networked, electronic expansion of ever changing regimes of visibility a “pluriopticum” rather than a “panopticum”), capitalism remains open to a new politics of emancipatory potentials.

An *Iconomy*, or economy of icons, also engages human actors in the evolutionary albeit oftentimes chaotic reconstruction of memory, narrative and agency. From a macroeconomic perspective, this openness of playfulness involves dynamic appropriation of critical perspectives into cultural industries as well as a permanent quest for the redesign of working and living spaces (thus the buzz around “creative cities” and flexibilization of boundaries between work and leisure). It is also noteworthy that the values of iconicity and attentionality have been present since the first forms of culture reproduction and industrialization¹.

That is to say, there is no human activity that is not involved by some form of “self-representation”, be it in the spheres of work, law, and especially culture. Benjamin’s thesis on the substitution of the value of the aura for the value of *exhibition*, promoted by the development of art reproduction techniques, is also an instance of this gradually emerging iconic sphere.

The problems resulting from these new forms of capital accumulation as image are not to be disregarded as media groups concentrate publishing and distribution power, financial and industrial advertising techniques further sophisticate the increase of alienation forms disguised as “big data” and both consumers and financial stakeholders hardly know the extent of their “exposure” to the regimes of visibility required by the flows of increasingly intangible and incommensurable economic goods and assets.

“Pay attention to this” is the authoritarian motto which becomes ingrained as fiercely as the public sphere becomes a vacuous accumulation of synchronous and asynchronous interactions that impede the dialectic

¹ See Panagia, Davide. Impressions of Hume: Cinematic Thinking and the Politics of Discontinuity, Chapter 3, *Hume’s Iconomy*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2013.

overcoming of each and every “this” into a self-conscious immersion in the digital *dasein*. Actually, individuals pay for the illusion of being more than “this”, the immediacy of visibility invites an opening of our selves to ever more complex forms of payment and representation of time, value and labor.

V

A final question at this stage of our inquiry refers to the ultimate contractual legitimation processes that are still accessible and possible in order to restore the collective design of the public sphere.

If individuals “pay” attention, what new issues are at stake for the regulation of visibility and icon creation? Which skills, knowledge and tools are accessible (open source software, for instance) in order to democratize the appropriation of gamicity and the openness of playfulness? Where is the desire model to be mimetized or destroyed in a conflictive and infinite recurrence of mirroring images of pleasure, bodily as well as intellectual?

The problematic imperative resulting from networked the self-representation is present not only in consumer-propaganda relations, but also in the industrial work sphere, the legal and moral spheres, the family and specially in the cultural domain (insofar as the “creative economy” becomes a dominant mode of regulation for both intra- and inter-industrial relations).

Therefore, we can say that the emerging iconomy is not only a new form of capital accumulation and asset valuation that uses aesthetic and expressive claims in order to reproduce itself; it also explains the predominance of these iconic elements that, even though being already present in the reproduction of the spheres of modern societies, have been now determining the action motivations in each sphere, devaluating thus their particular normativities. We call this form of domination an *Iconocracy*.

On the other hand, however, once the characteristics of this iconomy are fully acknowledged, there also emerges the possibility of engendering critiques to iconocracy. This can be done by revealing the iconic elements present within instrumental and strategic rationalities, and also by analyzing the problem as a practical, empirical matter, that is, which cannot dismiss public regulation and

further investigations into the realms of symbolic violence. This could be a first step in order to counterweight iconocracy through “icon distribution” policies and other forms of regulation of mimetic regimes.

For this second critique to occur, we must also connect iconomy to the most recent critiques of political economy made by the theory of recognition. If the Habermas of *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (1962) had already shown that in the basis of instrumental rationality there are practical and symbolic choices between different forms of nature appropriation, Axel Honneth goes further to show that work relations, economic transactions and consumer choices are also constituted by affective elements that are connected to individual and social processes of identity formation. In the third part of *Das Recht der Freiheit*, the philosopher argues that:

“consumers and producers are not here only in the roles of claimer and demander, but are connected in another way through complex interaction relations, from which eventual normative claims, the refusal to consume and protests can be heard; thus, the consumers want to contribute through their own decisions in order to remind the producers that they are obliged to the grounded recognition relation, which is, in Hegelian words, the conscious consideration (*Berücksichtigung*) of necessary opposed intentions” (Honneth, 2011:367. Trad. Livre do original em alemão).

Aside from this practical character of economic relations revealed through recognition claims from consumers and their protests, there are also relations between recognition and attention that could raise normative expectations to be used to criticize the appropriation of attention by iconic communication and iconocracy. With these relations, one can hence distinguish between an attentionality that relates to effective recognitions and that which involves a type of “deviant” recognition, or “recognition as ideology” (Honneth, 2010).

These relations come from the fact that in the sphere of family and in the character formation of the person, the building of self-confidence comes from reciprocal relations of attention between the child and the mother, or other members of the family. Attention, in this sense, relates to a love claim that is constitutive of the identity formation of the individual. And therefore, if we

identify that attentionality refers only to the capacity of a unilateral capture of one's attention, with more alarming elements than those connected to reciprocal relations of recognition between media audiences and producers, for example, with a unilateral reconstruction of one's life story², we can also identify this form of attentionality as ideological, or also as iconocracy.

Thus, in theoretical and methodological terms, if the dominant communication in the public sphere is an iconic mimetism fueled by digital animism, the generation of critical publicity processes depends on the playfulness of the public sphere so that it must remain an open issue for everyone to identify the reciprocal influences between technical-instrumental and aesthetical-expressive discourses, so that unreflected determinations of one over the others can be equalized through policies, practices and negotiation (play) spaces in the public game sphere.

Our theoretical challenge now is to research into the connections between the theory of recognition and the iconomy in order to play with normative standards against the prevalence of iconocracy.

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² For results of a study on this theme, connected to the exploitation of victim's biographies in the media, see. Günther, K. Ein Modell legitimen Scheiterns. Der Kampf um Anerkennung als Opfer; Lindemann, O. Opfergeschichten. Paradoxien der Anerkennung zwischen Erzählen und Zuhören. Both are present in: Honneth, A. Lindemann, O. Voswinkel, S. (orgs.) *Strukturwandel der Anerkennung. Paradoxien sozialer Integration in der Gegenwart*, 2013.

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