Being and Becoming in the Algorithmic Age

Bernard E. Harcourt

To change the world: the prerequisite, most often, is to change our experience of the world, to experience the world differently, to be shaken to our foundations, to have one's sense of self shattered. That is a process of both being and becoming. In order to turn that process in our favour, in this age of artificial intelligence, it will be crucial to transform data and algorithms into bits of justice.

The greatest fears about our new expository society and its doppelgänger logics in the age of artificial intelligence - but also perhaps their greatest promise - revolve around the ways in which algorithmic predictions shape who we are, what we desire, how we understand ourselves. The new algorithmic age forms our conceptions of selves by aggregating our past behaviours, predicting our future desires, and then recommending and suggesting what we will want - melding those very desires and our future selves as our smart devices grow artificially. The digital age works on us from the inside. As Antonio Negri notes, "The digital machine does not apply its devices of government from the outside but from the inside, it does not separate to command but on the contrary it implicates individuals, it projects its light, it exerts a power: the digital machine applies itself through the relationship between who commands and who obeys."[1]

The problem, then, is that our subjectivities are being shaped by forces that don't have "our best interests" at heart. We are being shaped by commercial ventures that merely want to make a profit and by political projects that simply seek power—or combinations of the two, in the guise of a Donald Trump or an Elon Musk. One need not believe in the notion of an "authentic" self or a "pure" or "unadulterated" subjectivity to fear being pushed or prodded and buffeted in different directions—away from those selves that, one might say, would have been more "organic." The concept of

---

1 Antonio Negri, "Lire Harcourt *Exposed*," trans. Judith Revel, December 14, 2016, p. 2, available at https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/revolution1313/files/2022/05/Toni-Negri-Li re-Exposed-Decembre-2016-FR.pdf.

"organic" is of course overly simplistic. If we experience shifting desire—if we are always in a process of becoming—is any one particular direction or desire more organic than the other? What does it mean or what would it mean to be left to our own devices? No, there are of course no "authentic" selves.

Yet we all have the intuition of what a *more* authentic self might mean. I, at least, have that intuition. I am a bit of a recluse. I like to think through things myself. I would prefer to be shaped by my own happenstance rather than being subject to other people's financial and other interests. It is the difference between spending a day writing and thinking, or spending a day following social media and responding to incoming emails.

Again, this is not to suggest that there is an authentic self, nor a self that is independent of the influence of others. We are creatures of our upbringing and nurturing. We learn to desire things as children, from our parents or siblings, our family and friends. We develop a way of being that is comfortable, surrounded by others, ensconced in their lives too. I am still surrounded by my parents' furniture and dishes and rugs and paintings and many of their books; and often, what I acquire resembles what they left me. I am not so naïve as to think or believe that I have an authentic self or an essence of my own.

Yet I genuinely fear forms of subjectivation that are influenced by algorithmic predictions intended to generate consumption through advertisements and recommendations. I fear that the solicitations—or worse, all of the hidden messaging from artificial intelligence—will bend me into another self.

Before getting carried away or too anxious, though, let me come back to where I started. I said: "but also perhaps their greatest promise." Let us take seriously Negri's challenge that we must not merely look at the dangers, but at the potentialities of new technologies.[2] What would it mean to do so?

The place to start would be to recognize the extent to which experiences shape our subjectivity and change it. Experiences are foundational to our sense of self. Michel Foucault, you will recall, often spoke of desiring experiences that would "de-subjectivate" and allow him to become other than he was. He often spoke of a desire to change himself. A desire to experience

---

2 Antonio Negri, "Lire Harcourt *Exposed*," trans. Judith Revel, December 14, 2016, https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/revolution1313/files/2022/05/Toni-Negri-Lire-Exposed-Decembre-2016-FR.pdf.

new things that make us new subjects. I feel a kindred spirit to that notion of de-subjectivation, though, I recognize, others may want to be the same or to find and anchor their true selves.

For Foucault, the goal of historicizing ways of experiencing the world was precisely to challenge our own experience of the present, our experience of reality. In interviews, he asserted this as his goal, for himself and for his readers. "I aim at having an experience myself—by passing through a determinate historical content—an experience of what we are today, of what is not only our past but also our present," he told Duccio Trombadori in 1978. "And I invite others to share the experience," he added.[3] Foucault spoke of creating "an experience of our modernity that might permit us to emerge from it transformed." This meant that, "at the conclusion of the book we can establish new relationships with what was at issue; for instance, madness, its constitution, its history in the modern world."[4]

Phenomenological approaches, he contended, tend to end up seeking ontological truths about being—in the case of Martin Heidegger, an ontological foundation of human caring (his term was "*Sorge*" or care), for Ludwig Binswanger and his *Daseinsanalyse*, an ontology of love.[5] But for Foucault, drawing on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, the historical analysis of experience led rather to "the task of 'tearing' the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely 'other' than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation." Foucault goes on:

> It is this de-subjectifying undertaking, the idea of a "limit-experience" that tears the subject from itself, which is the fundamental lesson that I've learned from these authors. And no matter how boring and erudite my resulting books have been, this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to "tear" me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same.[6]

In this, we are inevitably situated between being and becoming. That is certainly the case in our expository society in the algorithmic age.

---

3 Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 32-34.

4 Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 32-34.

5 Michel Foucault, *Binswanger et l'analyse existentielle*, ed. Elisabetta Basso (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS-Gallimard-Seuil, 2021), p. 133.

6 Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 31-32.

Nietzsche championed "becoming" in the nineteenth century. He championed every aspect of the aesthetic of becoming, of the discovery of truth, of the fabrication of truth, of the creation of new selves, of the invention of the self.

In certain passages, Nietzsche is adamant that there is only becoming and that the constant effort to impose the quality of being on becoming is precisely the recurring human struggle—it is the ultimate expression of the will to power. Women and men exercise power when they transform someone's act into their human nature, for instance when they turn a deviant act into someone's status as a "felon," a "convict," or a "dangerous individual": when they impose on something someone did, the character of an essence.

It should not come as a surprise that Heidegger, who championed being, would seek to tame Nietzsche's thought after his publication of *Being and Time* in 1927. Heidegger turns to Nietzsche in about 1936, and throughout his lectures and manuscripts from 1936-1946, Heidegger struggles to force the round peg of Nietzsche's writings on becoming (as well as on the will to power and the eternal return) into the square hole of *Being and Time*.

Being and Time was unquestionably transformative when it was published, and, for many readers, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Foucault, liberating: whereas before, philosophical discourse was trapped not only in religious dogma (and proofs of God's existence), but also in a disembodied repulsion for our materiality—with the body-mind divide, *cogito*, and such a fundamental distrust for everything body-related. Heidegger felt like a breath of fresh air and an embrace of our human experience, in 1927 at least—of our angst, of our fears, of our anguished concerns, of our bodily existence, of being *here* in the world, of our real experiences in relation to time and our own mortality. Heidegger changed the course of philosophical discourse in the twentieth century.

But Heidegger's writings were still tied to a metaphysical discourse that remained rigid in its embrace of the very concept of being. Nietzsche is the one who challenged that most—a century before—in part because he was not a metaphysician but rather a philologist, in part because of his temperament and intellect. Regardless, his writings fundamentally challenged the notion that there is permanence, being, a doer.

It is precisely the tension between Heidegger's being and Nietzsche's becoming that is at the heart of Heidegger's constant effort to both recognize his distance from Nietzsche, but simultaneously to attempt to close the

gap. As Tracy Colony remarks, this reflects the "enigmatic composite of proximity and distance that formed the interpretive horizon for Heidegger's inaugural confrontation with Nietzsche."[7] Heidegger resolved this enigma, I would argue, by means of the notion of eternal return. To be somewhat reductionist, I would contend that, for Heidegger, becoming becomes being by means of the eternal return. For Heidegger, the tension between being and becoming is resolved by converting becoming into being through the recurrence of becoming. Heidegger says as much when, referring to the most emblematic passage in Nietzsche on becoming ("To *stamp* Becoming with the character of Being—that is the *supreme will to power*")*,* Heidegger writes: "We ask: Why is this the *supreme* will to power? The answer is, because will to power in its *most* profound essence is nothing other than the permanentizing of Becoming into presence."[8]

"*The permanentizing of Becoming into presence*": that is what Heidegger believed that Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence could achieve. Throughout his lectures, Heidegger rehearses this central argument: for Nietzsche, the two central concepts were will to power and eternal return, and those two must be understood together, in order to grasp "in a unified way the doctrines of the eternal return of the same and will to power," and understand how they lead back to the idea of being.[9] "Both thoughts —will to power and eternal recurrence of the same—say *the same* and think the *same* fundamental characteristic of beings as a whole," Heidegger wrote.[10]

Nietzsche, more loyal to becoming, had anticipated Heidegger's later move, and warned against it, precisely in that emblematic passage that Heidegger returned to, again and again, from the unpublished fragments (included in the infamous compilation, *The Will to Power* § 617). Following the first sentence, "To *stamp* Becoming with the character of Being—that is the *supreme will to power*," Nietzsche adds, a paragraph later:

---

7   Tracy Colony, "The Death of God and the Life of Being: Heidegger's Confrontation with Nietzsche," pp. 197-217, in *Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays*, ed. Daniel Dahlstrom (Cambridge University Press, 2011), at p. 198.

8   Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes 3 and 4*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperOne, 1987 and 1982 [1961]), "Vol. III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics," p. 156; see also *id.*, p. 213.

9   Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes 1 and 2*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperOne, 1979 and 1984 [1961]), "Vol. I: The Will to Power as Art," p. 17.

10 Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes 3 and 4*, p. 10; *see also*, *id.*, p. 166 and 180-181; *id.*, "Volume IV: Nihilism," p. 7-8 and Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes 1 and 2*, "Vol. II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same," p. 198-199.

> That *everything recurs* is the closest *approximation of a world of Becoming to one of Being: –peak of the meditation.*[11]

It is almost as if Nietzsche were writing to Heidegger: at best an approximation. Certainly not an equation. For Nietzsche, it seems, we are left in a world of becoming.

We might say that de-subjectivation is a form of becoming. A form of becoming that alters our being, even if it is only a momentary being. Transformation, then, implies moments of being and of becoming—they are constant becoming and being, constantly becoming other.

In this struggle between becoming and being, there emerges something of critical import: an unexpected graft of the ethical reading of the eternal return (as Gilles Deleuze understood the concept) onto the permanence of being, under the guise of an aesthetic model of creation. The ethical reading of the concept of the eternal return is the idea that the threat of one's actions recurring over and over imposes on us a moral imperative to act ethically—since we will relive our actions in eternity. It is that conjoining of the eternal recurrence of ethical choice, heightened by the gravity of being, and understood as artistic production, that I would call an "aesthetics of being."

It can be placed in fruitful discussion with other critical concepts from the twentieth century, for instance, André Breton's aesthetics of the *frisson*, or Foucault's aesthetics of existence. It is not Heidegger's concept, but it emerges from his herculean struggle—and ultimate failure—in the face of Nietzsche.

The aesthetics of being is how we craft our changing selves, how we negotiate the relation between becoming and being—going back and forth to appreciate and transform our subjectivity, to de-subjectivate ourselves at time, to resubjectivate ourselves at another time, to change ourselves in order to change the world.

In the end, I would not attribute this aesthetics of being to Heidegger, but to Nietzsche—which is all the better, since Heidegger's fascist politics were so utterly intolerable. Or perhaps, to be more modest, I would characterize it as an effort *toward* an aesthetics of being and becoming. It emerges from a confrontation. It serves to heighten the gravity of our constant ethical

---

11 Quoted in Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes 1 and 2*, Vol. I, p. 19; *see* Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), §617, p. 330.

choices and to model them on aesthetic creation. Later, Jean-Paul Sartre pushed the concept of being toward existence in the 1950s, embracing a notion of existence that was closer to becoming: a constant becoming through one's actions *en situation*. Later still, Foucault pushed it further toward the notion of de-subjectivation. In the digital age, it may be time to push it even further toward an aesthetics of being and becoming.

We live in a world that is a competition for attention and desire. Meta wants us to spend more time on Instagram and to encourage our friends to join, and Elon Musk on X. Authors want us to spend more time reading their books—and sharing their experiences. We are surrounded by attention merchants, as Tim Wu tells us.[12] The time could not be more pressing to imagine an ethics directed toward that aesthetics of being and becoming.

I have come to appreciate the relationship between being and becoming, especially today, in light of our debates over identity politics. The fact is, identities can be motivating forces that push people to action, without being static, without being pure being. There are many times in life in which our identities have real, tangible consequences. We may be treated by others in certain ways because of our identities. Women may be treated in certain ways because they appear to be women. A person may be treated differently because they appear to be Black or of Latin descent. Those are moments of political mobilization. They produce social movements like Black Lives Matter and MeToo. They represent forms of being with consequences—as the Combahee River Collective wrote, when it coined the term "identity politics."[13]

The Combahee River Collective not only coined the term "identity politics," it introduced the expression "interlocking" systems of oppression and developed a paradigm for how to think and act at the intersection of multiple political struggles.[14] The Collective exposed the way in which people are treated because of their appearances and how that can be galvanizing. It

---

12   Tim Wu, The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads (New York: Knopf, 2016).

13   Combahee River Collective, "Combahee River Collective Statement," p. 15–27, in How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017 [1977]).

14   "Combahee River Collective Statement," p. 19, 15; see also Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Until Black Women Are Free, None of Us Will Be Free," New Yorker, July 20. https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/until-black-women-are-free-none-of-us-will-be-free.

can politicize. Identities are not always associated with biological traits, but they are forms of being that we cannot always easily escape. In the political struggles around what we call "identity politics," we are constantly navigating between identities and the transformation of identities—between being and becoming. We can, at times, take on new identities. Some are more malleable than others. But at the same time, we resist forms of subjectivation by negotiating the space between being and becoming.

In order to achieve social change, a prerequisite is that people's experience of reality, of present reality, change. In order for people to get agitated and to act, they have to have experiences that shape how they encounter and understand their world. That will necessarily take place at the intersection of being and becoming. When asked to describe what "revolution" means to him, Toni Negri responds that it means "to constantly live and construct moments of novelty and rupture."[15] "A revolution isn't made, Toni says, "it makes you."[16]

How then do we allow ourselves to be transformed without fear that we are being manipulated by artificial intelligence and other people's interests? How do we live in the algorithmic age without being its pawn?

The only way forward will be to push the algorithms toward justice. We need to create experiences of justice and feed the databases and cloud storage with stories and achievements of justice. If we just fear technology and withdraw from the digital age, then we will have ceded the ground. Algorithms, big data, artificial intelligence are here to stay. They are the space of the future. We need to shape them now. To create genuine experiences of justice. Truth is, we will never return to the analogue world.

We do not have a choice, in the end. We must find ways to deploy the digital experience in such a way as to inspire political activism and engagement. How? Through the very same seductions, temptations, desires, and experiences that move us, transform us, de-subjectivate us. By finding ways to draw in users and readers into the arc of justice. To create experiences that will shape the way that people experience the world and lead them to fight or continue fighting for justice—in the face of all odds.

---

15 Roberto Ciccarelli, "Antonio Negri: 'The central banks are today's Winter Palace'," *il manifesto*, November 7, 2017, https://global.ilmanifesto.it/antonio-negri-the-central-banks-are-todays-winter-palace/.

16 Ciccarelli, "Antonio Negri: 'The central banks are today's Winter Palace'," https://global.ilmanifesto.it/antonio-negri-the-central-banks-are-todays-winter-palace/.

At the same time, we must fundamentally transform the political economy of the digital realm. Why is it that someone like Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, owns X? It is because he understands that these are the spaces of influence and subjectivation. It is not for nothing that Twitter was worth $44 billion when he bought it.

The social media platforms make their money from digital advertising. Meta, X and others most of their revenue selling personal data and advertisements—in the billions of dollars. In 2021, Twitter generated $4.5 billion through its advertising services, mostly by selling promoted products, such as Promoted Ads, Twitter Amplify, and Follower Ads to advertisers.[17] This advertising revenue represented about 90% of Twitter's income. The other 10% was from the sale of data—more technically, data licenses that allow partner enterprises to collect, mine, and analyse historical and real-time data on Twitter's platform.[18]

In order to generate this revenue, Meta, X, and other social media and technology companies need to have a large and growing user bases. In other words, we are the ones generating their revenue. Their algorithms are trained on us. So in the long-run, we need to lay claim to those resource—our own data—in order to transform the political economy of the digital realm. But in the meantime, we all—the targets of their algorithms—need to feed their servers with experiences of justice. We need to overwhelm their data with the lived experience and the struggle for justice.

In sum, we must tweak the algorithms for justice: we must inspire others by making justice more appealing than injustice and deploy these new technologies to promote equality. We must push the frontier and develop new ways of thinking beyond the actuarial, the statistical, the merely algorithmic, toward algorithmic justice. It is an ethical imperative, one that aims, ultimately, toward an aesthetics of being and becoming.

---

17 Nathan Reiff, "How Twitter Makes Money," April 28, 2022, https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/120114/how-does-twitter-twtr-make-money.asp.

18 Reiff, "How Twitter Makes Money."