A vindication of Simondon's political anthropology

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Abstract

Our article questions Balibar's claim that Simondon's concept of the transindividual does not fulfil all the requirements (the 'three orders of consideration') for a materialist 'philosophical anthropology'. In fact, we demonstrate that Simondon's philosophy of individuation, and notably his concept of the transindividual, can be, as it were, included in a genealogy of aleatory materialism. Simondon's philosophy of individuation is indeed a philosophy of the transindividual insofar as it involves the constant revision of the different historical forms taken by social relations in the coevolution of human beings and their techno-social and natural milieu. Simondon's way of conceiving anthropogenesis as an open and 'metastable' field in which individuals and processes relate to each other maintaining their own knowledge in motion, marks, in our view, a materialist style of thinking. Against this background we analyse Simondon's overcoming of the dichotomy between the individual and society through a 'double rejection', we sketch his theory of a 'double source' for social relations, and we explain in what sense, from his perspective, the transindividual 'can be said in many ways'.

Keywords

Simondon, Balibar, transindividual, materialism, philosophical anthropology

Although the lack of an open political engagement is evident in most of Simondon's texts, we would like to vindicate the political nature of his philosophy of individuation and, in particular, to stress how far the philosophical anthropology Simondon develops under the term transindividual can be, as it were, included in a genealogy of aleatory materialism. Our assertion here is that this goes far beyond Simondon's use of the concept of the transindividual. We take Balibar's point that there are indeed antinomies in Simondon's philosophy of nature. This is nowhere more present than in Simondon's struggles to overcome the classical opposition between determinism and indeterminism with a new theory of causality and singularity, as well as the more 'modern' opposition between a substantialist / relational ontology within non-totalised systems. Both struggles are grounded, for Simondon, in a paradigmatic use of quantum physics, connected to the re-elaboration of the theory of information (e.g. Simondon [2005: 144, and 234, note 1]. See Bardin [2015] and Rodriguez and Blanco [2017])

We believe, however, that the original development of Simondon's philosophy of individuation has the potential to lead to a new form of materialism, something that many of his 'political' interpreters have rightly intuited. Simondon himself had no doubt, when replying to Ricœur's accusation of 'objectivism', on the primacy of nature: 'How could one admit that nature is a part of discourse? This is the postulate underlying your argument, and this is what I shall definitely refute' [Simondon 1960: 759]. Simondon's claim will be taken here as a very Spinozian warning not to imagine a human realm within the realm of nature. With this caution in mind, in our reply to Balibar we shall specifically deal with the second issue he pointed out, and maintain that Simondon's concept of the transindividual fulfils all the requirements (the 'three orders of consideration') for a materialist 'philosophical anthropology'.

From the outset it is worthwhile taking a moment to mark the boundaries of the problematic field Simondon entered when he chose the term transindividual. In his 1934-

1935 seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Alexandre Kojève analysed transindividual relationality as the key to the anthropogenesis of human desire [Read 2016: 39-40]. Jacques Lacan, who intensively followed Kojève's seminar, recalled in *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse* (1953) that the domain of speech 'is that of concrete discourse qua field of the subject's transindividual reality', and 'the unconscious is that part of concrete discourse *qua* transindividual' [Lacan 1966: 214]. In *Néo-finalisme* (1952) Raymond Ruyer, who shared with Simondon a large set of interests and a debate on *Les limites du progrès humain* (1958), referred to a 'region of the trans-spatial and of the trans-individual' [Ruyer 1952] (see also Ruyer [1958] and Simondon's response [1959]). Finally, Lucien Goldmann also used the term transindividual to define the collective subject – and he did so with a certain frequency throughout his intellectual career [Morfino 2014]. This list is there to remind us that, when Simondon was formulating his theory, the term transindividual had already been used to designate, in a somewhat 'mysterious' and perhaps unconscious manner, both what crosses the individual transcending it and the very essence of the collective. It is against this background that the path later taken by Simondon in his attempt to reformulate the traditional relation of opposition between the individual and the social through the concept of the transindividual should be assessed.[1]

Pointing out the epistemological, ontological and political stakes of this attempt we aim to 'vindicate' Simondon's philosophical anthropology in the light of his theory of technics. Firstly, we will refer to the project of an 'axiomatisation' of the human sciences that he formulated in *Forme, information, potentiels* (1960), relying on his former elaboration of the concept of the 'transindividual' in both *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (1958, henceforth *Individuation*) and *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (1958).[2] Secondly, we will argue that Bergson's paradigm of a 'double source' for social structures, as Simondon interpreted it *via* Canguilhem, allows for a constructive understanding of social processes. Finally, we will conclude by discussing the political function played by the concept of the transindividual in defining the subjectivation of the human animal. This will explain why Simondon's unconventional philosophical anthropology can be said to mark the opening of an ontological and epistemological site of political struggle.

The 'double rejection' of individual and society

Balibar attributes a common strategy to the philosophies of the transindividual: a 'double rejection' that overcomes the dichotomy between the individual and society. Simondon systematically adopted this strategy at different levels in his philosophy of individuation, a real work in progress that mixed elements from the French phenomenological and epistemological traditions. He did so firstly at the epistemological level, by carrying out a critique of 'psychologism' and 'sociologism'; secondly, at the anthropological level, he conducted very specific research on technics, which went against the grain of the most common hypotheses defining the nature of the transindividual in relation to meaning and language; finally, he did so at the ontological level, by providing multiple ontologies of the transindividual out of the analysis of a number of structures and processes of individuation.

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[1] We would like to thank Juan Manuel Heredia (University of Buenos Aires) for his help with these notes on the transindividual.
[2] In fact, after appearing both in *Individuation* and in the conclusion of *Du mode*, the term 'transindividual' disappears in Simondon's subsequent writings.

We shall consider the first two elements here, and then specifically deal with the third one in the concluding section.

In *Forme, information, potentiels*, a conference held at the *Société Française de Philosophie* in 1960, Simondon does not explicitly mention the transindividual but openly plans an 'axiomatisation of the human sciences' on the basis of the refutation, along the lines of Piaget, of both 'psychologism' and 'sociologism'. The principles of this possible axiomatisation should be grounded on an 'active and common centre' [Simondon 2005: 533] which can be placed neither at the level of the individual nor at the level of society. We shall rather begin, he continues, by first developing a theory of the possible kinds of correlations between the elements of a system, and then defining what is neither individual nor social because it is both things at the same time. Form, information and potentials are the three principles of correlation isolated by Simondon by referring to *Gestalttheorie* and the cybernetic theory of information. These also refer to his own proposal of a 'human energetics' that is not primarily concerned with how individuals and societies are structured, but rather with how 'societies transform themselves, why groups change in relation to conditions of metastability' [Simondon 2005: 550].

Simondon's research, because it openly focussed on the transformation of social structures, pointed in a direction that appears to be quite different from the one pursued by structuralism, even if one takes into account the developments of a structuralism that is intended to be genetic, as in the cases of Goldmann and Piaget. As Guchet explains, despite what the term might suggest, 'to "axiomatise" does not mean for Simondon to "formalise", and even less to "naturalise", to axiomatise means to organise a system around a definite polarisation; since their birth the human sciences have been organised along the lines of the axiomatisation of the normal and the regular; Simondon meant to undo this organization in order to reconfigure the human sciences otherwise' [Guchet 2010: 14]. At the same time, Simondon was also situated far from the phenomenological tradition that had sheltered him, in particular through Merleau-Ponty. Thus, in the debate following Simondon's paper at the *Société*, one can see Jean Hyppolite, director of his PhD thesis, criticising what he considers the insufficient consideration paid by his former student to the question of information, and the risk he was running in replacing it with notions (such as 'potential energy') that may have led him to fall into some sort of 'philosophy of nature'. It is instead in this very direction that Simondon's interest for technology develops, tending to direct the entirety of his research, which is ultimately grounded on his profound intellectual debt to Georges Canguilhem.

Indeed, the originality of Simondon's notion of the transindividual can only emerge in the light of the predominant role played by technics in his thought. At the beginning of *Forme, information, potentiels* Simondon points out that the study of the technical object can provide 'a model, an example, perhaps a paradigm' [Simondon 1960: 532] for the understanding of the relationship between form, information and potentials. This connects directly to the problem of the transindividual as it is presented in the conclusion of *Du mode*:

> The technical object taken according to its essence, which is to say the technical object insofar as it has been invented, thought and willed, and taken up [*assumé*] by a

human subject, becomes the medium [*le support*] and symbol of this relationship, which we would like to name *transindividual*. [Simondon 2017: 252]

Support, symbol, example, paradigm: the study of the mode of existence of technical objects could provide, according to Simondon, both the principles of an epistemological renewal of the human sciences, centred on functioning patterns and processes rather than on structures and configurations, and a privileged access to the transindividual. This entry to the concept is radically alternative to both the one practiced in his time and that prevailing in most interpretations of his work, where the transindividual is usually understood in relation to language or meaning, and hence to the unconscious. In fact, it is in line with André Leroi-Gourhan – and at odds with both phenomenology and structuralism – that Simondon considers symbolic production, language and meaning included, as partially subordinate to technics as a constructive relationship between the human being and the world. Therefore, we believe that any examination of the problem of the transindividual in Simondon would be incomplete if it does not take into account the centrality of technics in his theory. As we are going to explain, it is precisely because of the function Simondon attributes to technics that the 'double rejection' mentioned by Balibar works as a source for constructive thinking within the philosophy of individuation.

The 'double source' of social relation

Simondon's systematic 'double rejection' had a constructive counterpart in his theorisation of a 'double source' for the formation and development of social relations. For this purpose, Simondon discarded what he considered as the 'biologist' reductionism of both Freud and Marx, and instead drew extensively from the concepts elaborated by Bergson in his 'anthropological' book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). Thus in Simondon's *Individuation* Bergson's understanding of a twofold tendency within social processes is re-elaborated by referring to Leroi-Gourhan's early work *Milieu and techniques*, where the paleoanthropologist identifies in the *technical* relation between human groups and their environment a factor of normative innovation and the ultimate ground of the opening of groups to other groups and social change altogether. Technical objects cannot exist, function and develop without maintaining a close relation to the biology of human bodies and the variations of natural milieu. On the contrary, symbolic objects are not directly constrained by the material processes of production they rely on. For this very reason, while the group's symbolic life is inherently reproductive, the 'materialised' 'layer of [technical] objects' by which human groups are 'enveloped' [Leroi-Gourhan 1945: 361] conveys a potential universality that, according to Simondon, is never reducible to a given symbolic code.

Simondon thus situates the tense relation between the relatively fixed patterns of biological individuation and the relatively open innovations of technical individuation within the core of psycho-social individuation. Biology and technology respond to each other. Each event or process emerging out of the tense relationship between them questions the self-reproductive tendency of the symbolic order as an unconscious determination, a repetition that interrupts the symbolic chain and injects in its structure the 'frenzy' of normative invention from which transindividual individuation develops. Simondon denotes by 'culture' the material network of symbolic and technical objects working as both the outcome and the double source for transindividual individuation. Culture is what 'mediates' the

relationship between individuals, between human societies, and between human societies and their milieu. It is a techno-symbolic 'regulative apparatus' of social systems, which is itself twofold and inherently conflictual, and this apparatus is concerned at the same time with social reproduction and with normative innovation (Simondon is specifically relying on Canguilhem [1955]). These two sources of psycho-social processes define the threshold of transindividual individuation in Simondon, their interplay shaping a metastable system made of relations *and* processes in which psychical *and* collective individuation can 'normally or exceptionally' take place [Simondon 2005: 165].[3]

The transindividual 'can be said in many ways'

Since his earliest consideration of Simondon's thought, Balibar uses the 'transindividual' as a tool for understanding the relation between the individual *conatus* and the forms of political organisation in Spinoza [Balibar 1997]. The transindividual helps him explain the paradoxical unity of 'independence and community' characterising the individual against the background of 'the relationship between individuation and individualisation, wherein the latter becomes a pre-condition of the former, not the reverse' [Balibar 1997: 36]. However, taking this stance, one runs the risk of inscribing Simondon's physico-biological individuation [of an individual organism] into psycho-social individua*lisa*tion [of a subject], and thus of reading the entire conceptual apparatus of Simondon's philosophy in the light of the transindividual, rather than placing that very concept *within* the latter's theory of individuation. From a perspective that considers individualisation as 'a pre-condition' of individuation, human biological *individuation* may be understood as entirely resolved with no *excess* within the forms of collective life in which the individual of the species *homo sapiens* can – but not necessarily has to – undergo a process of *subjectivation*. For this reason, by relying on Balibar's understanding of the concept of the transindividual as both ontological and epistemological, it is worth clarifying how Simondon uses it to ground and describe processes of subjectivation whose precondition is the achievement of physico-biological individuation.[4]

In Simondon's philosophy of individuation the concept of the transindividual serves to define at the same time an emerging relation between individual organisms and social groups, on the one hand, and between those groups and their natural, technical and symbolic milieus, on the other. This means that, first, biological individuation is a precondition of all the possible 'individua*lisa*tions' taking place at the transindividual level, and, second, transindividual relations can only emerge in a milieu populated by symbolic and technical objects, which, in turn, they constantly transform. This developing milieu mediating the relation between individuated psycho-social *structures* (in Simondon's terminology 'biological communities') and individuating psycho-social *processes*, is where subjectivity emerges. It is somewhat confusing that Simondon uses the term 'subject' to define simultaneously the individuation of an organism as well as the specific kind of individuation from which the 'subject-being [*l'être sujet*]' emerges at the level of the transindividual. However, he defines the subject as 'a more or less consistent system of three subsequent [ontological] phases: preindividual, individuated and transindividual'

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[3] This field is relational and not species-specific: 'it is not a matter of a nature, an essence, serving to found an anthropology: it is just a threshold which is crossed. Animals are better endowed for living than for thinking, human beings better for thinking than for living. Both of them live and think, normally or exceptionally' [Ibid.].

[4] Simondon originally published only the first part of his *Individuation* with the title *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* [Simondon 1964].

[Simondon 2005: 310]. Because in certain given metastable conditions the living being has to calculate itself as a factor of the system-problem to be solved, it has to become external to itself, as it were, to 'intervene […] as a subject' [Ibid.: 29]. Consequently, the transindividual is paradoxical topologically speaking. As Simondon put it, it 'is not exterior to the individual, but is nevertheless partially detached from it' [Ibid.: 281]. Thus all psychic *and* collective (transindividual) individualisations, 'every thought, every conceptual discovery, every emotional upsurge', should be understood as a 'partial but faithful' repetition (and transformation) of preindividual potentials that are still present at the accomplishment of any 'absolute' individuation at the biological level [Ibid.: 264]. Without the mediation of technics, however, the biological 'subject' would not be able to open itself to transindividual individuation, and the field of relations that we usually name 'human nature' would not emerge.

What the field of 'human nature' in Simondon may define is a set of biological and technical processes of individuation *and* the effort of symbolisation they continually engender.[5] This effort is infinite because what is organic and technical simply cannot be neutralised. Even if it always threatens the system's symbolic reproduction, it is nevertheless the precondition of its existence and functioning. Thus the efficacy of symbolisation is always incomplete, precisely because of 'human nature'. No integral absorption of bio-technical individuation within any invented 'transindividual signification' is therefore possible. And because every theory is an act of symbolic individualisation, no theory of transindividual individuation can ever be complete. This is certainly the case for any philosophical anthropology, if it is meant to stay open to the on-going processes from which it also emerges.

By underscoring the necessity of including Simondon's understanding of biological and technical individuation in his concept of the transindividual, we are not claiming that the thus conceived transindividual would provide, by itself, a ready made social ontology. Although in his writings the transindividual provides the link between the theory of individuation displayed in *Individuation* and the philosophy of technics recurring in *Du mode*, Simondon never explicitly deals with this nexus in his research.[6] In the preindividual-individual-transindividual set of phases defining the emergence of a subject, the transindividual is ultimately defined as a new 'plunge' [*plongée*] into the preindividual. In other words, it is a moment that continues the open dynamic of previous individuations. It is on this basis that the transindividual in *Individuation* appears in varied ways: 'psychic life [*le psychique*] is some [*du*] transindividual in the act of being born [*naissant*]' [Simondon 2005: 166]; 'religion is the domain of the transindividual' [Simondon 2005: 250]; 'the psycho-social is some [*du*] transindividual' [Simondon 2005: 303], or it is even 'the transindividual developed'. All of these determinations are moreover related in different ways, as we have said, to the transindividual nature of technical objects. This variety of meanings suggests that, in Simondon's perspective, a theory of the transindividual – that is of the emerging field of bio-techno-symbolic relations where the conditions of development *and* redefinition of human nature reside in the last instance – is always in the process of being constructed.

Conclusion

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[5] According to Simondon culture stabilises the system by 'MANIPULATING in some way the symbols representing such a technical gesture or such a biological drive' [Ibid.: 504].
[6] The only exception to this general rule is perhaps the small text *Note complémentaire* (ca1958), in Simondon [2005]: 503-27.

Simondon indeed plays the quite old and very political game of defining 'human nature' between nature, technics and culture. The rules for his version of the game do not identify human nature with an ultimately defining feature such as reason or language or even the transindividual. This, however, should not be interpreted as a refusal to analyse relationality 'on the terrain of philosophical anthropology', as Balibar suggests. Like every philosophy of the transindividual, Simondon's philosophy of individuation does not dissolve individuals in a metaphysical relationality of processes, but rather involves the constant revision of the understanding of the different historical forms taken by social relations in the coevolution of human beings and their techno-social and natural milieu. Conceiving anthropogenesis as an open and 'metastable' field in which individuals and processes relate to each other maintaining their own knowledge in motion, marks, in our view, a materialist style of thinking. To push our point home here, it suffices to conclude with a final question on Simondon's philosophy of psychic and collective individuation: is it not a philosophical anthropology, in which the redefinition of its own object *and* subject, the transindividual, is itself a political stake for materialist philosophers?

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