

WE MUST ADAPT! INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA STIEGLER

Interviewed by Marcel O’Gorman

INTRODUCTION

*At the back of Café Utopy, a modern but charming woman-run establishment in a suburb of Bordeaux, I set the table for an interview with Barbara Stiegler. Beside the iPad equipped with OtterAI transcription software, I lay out her books *Nietzsche et la vie* and *Il faut s’adapter*, as well as two popular tracts published by Gallimard that dissect with surgical precision the neoliberal program that managed the Covid-19 pandemic in France. At ten minutes past our scheduled meeting time (a tardiness that is hardly alarming in France) the phone behind the counter rings. I watch as the manager picks up the wireless receiver, responds briefly to the person on the line, then walks over and extends the retro device in my direction.*

“C’est Barbara,” she says with a smile. Indeed, Barbara is on the line, calling to inform me that another appointment has run long, and she will be 20 minutes late.

*The friendliness of this gesture, the anachronism of a live voice on a landline, and the evident closeness between the café manager and the controversial philosopher, struck me as belonging to a more harmonious and human-scale world. Utopy indeed. While it might be easy to criticize Barbara Stiegler’s vision of a new democracy as utopian, she most certainly cannot be faulted for misunderstanding our current neoliberal alternative. Stiegler’s most recent book *Adapt!*, which traces the historical alignment of neo-Darwinism of neoliberalism, provides a platform for resistance against the increasingly powerful collusion of state and corporation.*

*As an engaged philosopher, Stiegler has brought her fight for democracy to the streets, organizing protests with the *Gilets jaunes* and calling for radical political reform while publicly decrying anti-intellectual propaganda. Most recently, she won a court case against the former National Minister of Education, whom she called “garbage” on the X platform after he implied that the assassination of two French professors was a result of “intellectual complicity with terrorism.” For Stiegler, the aggressive stance against professors and intellectuals, whether it’s propagated by Michel Blanquer in France or J.D. Vance in the US, is yet another social program designed to enforce docility and adaptability in the public sphere. This conservative program, educated on evolutionary theory and driven by market demands, is precisely the target of Stiegler’s organizing.*

Barbara Stiegler is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Science, Philosophy and the Humanities at Université Bordeaux-Montaigne and Director of the Master’s Program in

Care, Ethics and Health. This interview was conducted in Bordeaux, France on March 25, 2025. It was recorded in French and translated by Marcel O’Gorman with assistance from DeepL, following the recommendation of Barbara Stiegler herself. Marcel O’Gorman is Founding Director of the Critical Media Lab and a University Research Chair at the University of Waterloo. His writing and critical design projects examine the impacts of technocapitalism on the more-than-human condition.

MO *I discovered your writing quite by chance in the Librairie des Abbesses. That was in 2022. Your tract co-written with François Alla, Santé publique année zéro (Public Health Year Zero), struck me like a bolt of lightning. You offered some piercing insights into how the pandemic was managed politically, raising issues that were not adequately discussed in North America.*

Here is an excerpt: “Instead of prioritizing the protection of those most vulnerable to the virus by promoting their ability to mobilize and take action on their own health, this policy has, for two years, continued to exacerbate all inequalities and vulnerabilities.” (34-35) This tract offers an education on the inner workings of neoliberal politics.

BS Many people thought that the pandemic had led neoliberalism to take a break, to cease to operate, and to give way to a welfare state. This misinterpretation was very strong in progressive circles, in left-wing circles. Many people believed that thanks to the virus, neoliberalism was giving way to a social politics because it led to a new a health policy. There was a great deal of naivety among progressive circles who are unfamiliar with neoliberalism and unaware that neoliberalism has already developed a whole social policy, a health policy, an education policy. To understand this, you have to understand the difference between neoliberalism and old-style liberalism.

Old-style liberalism focuses on the economic sphere, on trade. Social interactions are left to their own devices. So the state ultimately has very limited responsibilities, what we call in French the *mission régaliennne de l’état* (fundamental mission of the state): policing, justice, customs. The state must let things be and be minimal. That is classical liberalism. The new liberalism considers that the market does not work on its own, that we must not let it be, that laissez-faire has led to disasters.

MO *Yes, your work historicizes neoliberalism in precise ways, drawing out leverage points for resistance. And this has led you to focus on the relationship between neoliberalism and pseudo-Darwinian theories.*

BS Neoliberalism was born out of the crisis of 1929, which was a crisis of laissez-faire. It was determined that the state had to be rebuilt so that it could fundamentally transform the population and even transform the human species. If the market doesn't work, it's

because the human species is unsuited to globalization, and so it must be adapted to globalization. They had to do some re-adaptation work. According to someone like Lippmann, a cultural revolution was needed. And so the state is going to become extremely invasive in the fields of education, health, social action, and law. They have a social agenda. In the field of health, there is also an agenda.

MO *How did this agenda slip under the radar of progressives?*

BS Progressives despise neoliberalism. They don't see its power to subvert the social sphere. And so as soon as they see a social policy, they believe it's a left-wing policy. But in fact, it's a perfectly right-wing and social policy. And that's what happened with this health policy in some countries. Not in all countries, but in France, for example, we had a neoliberal experiment on a virus.

MO *Your other tract from that period, *De la démocratie en Pandémie (On Democracy in a Pandemic)*, sold over 100,000 copies. That's extraordinary. In this work, you refer to the “world after” as described by Alexandre Labruffe. To quote, this is “A disinfected but polluted world. It's the world before, but worse. More hygienic. More eugenic. Bloodless.” Here we are now in the “world after.” If you were asked to write a second volume of this tract, what would it be about? Has the pandemic made this neoliberal agenda more visible?*

BS No, not at all, since there has been no serious intellectual work on this epidemic in my view. I was extremely disappointed, and even extremely angry at the silence of intellectuals and their docility, their servility to public discourse in a country like France or Italy.

So there has been no analysis, and therefore no visibility of neoliberalism. I tried to do some work, but I remained very isolated. Intellectual initiatives remained very isolated, even though they received a huge public response. Yes, I sold 120,000 copies of these two books. But these books were not publicized. They were even censored. So this book [*De la démocratie en Pandémie*] circulated underground, but it did not take its place in academia or in the intellectual world.

The neoliberal management of the virus was not made visible at all, and there was no subsequent critical analysis or assessment of what happened. On the contrary, COVID has become a huge taboo that no one talks about.

So my conviction is really what *Santé publique année zéro* says, which is that if a new virus, a new contagious disease were to arrive, we would make exactly the same mistakes again.

MO *Honestly, because of this taboo, I almost canceled my plan to initiate this conversation with a discussion of the pandemic. It's an easy subject to repress. But while rereading your work, I understood that it's very important not to let the subject drop.*

If someone were to respond today by saying that No, a neoliberal agenda did not drive social policy during the pandemic—the government simply followed the advice of scientific experts. And so did the left...

BS Be careful: experts are not the same thing as scientists. Experts, unlike scientists, translate scientific knowledge into policy advice. This is not the same thing as the work of scientists. In France, there are around 60 experts who are perfectly equipped to deal with zoonoses, acute respiratory diseases, pandemics, and there are all kinds of plans, etc. It's important to know that from the very first days when the president finally took this virus seriously—because for weeks he didn't take it seriously—he sidelined all these experts and created a scientific council that he could easily manipulate and that was supposed to be at his service and at the service of his decisions.

He took people who were mainly AIDS specialists, who therefore had no expertise in respiratory viruses. These are not at all the same modes of transmission, and these AIDS people projected onto the pandemic or epidemic situation a framework for understanding that was specific to a sexually transmitted disease. So they were obsessed with not stigmatizing patients, with the idea that everyone should be treated equally, etc. This had counterproductive effects because by treating everyone equally, we didn't take into account vulnerability factors, vulnerable people. And we put them in competition with people who were in perfect health.

MO *Can you explain a little how this counterproductive health policy played out socially?*

BS For example, in order to access vaccines, the most socially disadvantaged, the physically weakest, and those most vulnerable to the virus were competing with people who were extremely skilled in digital technology, socially adept, in good health, and who did not necessarily need these products. The vulnerable found themselves stripped of their rights by stronger people, because neoliberals see the population as an aggregate of individuals, all competing against each other for access to innovation. The goal is to be more adaptable than the other and to move faster in accessing innovation. We put all members of the population in competition with each other so that they alone could access the latest innovations, and in doing so, we failed to implement a genuine healthcare policy that took vulnerability into account.

This was orchestrated by a scientific council that had put on AIDS-colored glasses and therefore completely ignored factors such as inequality and the vulnerability of the elderly, obese, diabetic, and other at-risk groups. This led people to believe that the virus was universal. But as soon as the scientific council began to show signs of disagreement with

the President of the Republic, he excluded them and created another council that was under his control. So, in fact, he exploited expertise perfectly.

I'll give you an example: when he wanted to close schools, he used infectious disease experts. When he wanted to open schools, he used child psychiatrists. And it's very easy to do with expertise, because expertise is not real knowledge, it's atomic data. Knowledge is broken down into a set of data or data isolated from each other, making it very easy for politics to exploit expertise. Science is not so easily exploited.

MO *Surely, the data produced by science can be instrumentalized, recontextualized outside of their studies.*

That's the logic of data. We use certain data, certain figures. We take them out of context, and then they are not part of a process of knowledge with discipline, method, system, everything that belongs to science. It's very easy to extract data like this and exploit it.

BS So there was absolutely no reign of science during COVID. On the contrary, science was despised, mistreated, and exploited for political ends. Moreover, this was done by a neoliberal power that was losing momentum, which was being challenged in the streets by the Gilets jaunes, by the social movement. This was an opportunity for the President of the Republic, who was politically very weakened, to improvise as a warlord. That's why he declared, “We are at war,” and repeated the word “war” seventeen times in a speech, imposing himself as a warlord who demanded sacred union around himself.

MO *Your view of neoliberalism is primarily one of liberalism marked by a social agenda. One could say that it is a kind of extreme paternalism. In fact, a recurring theme in your work, beginning with your book on Nietzsche, is that human beings are not physiologically or cognitively equipped to withstand the shocks of technological innovation. And so, they must be trained through a collusion of political and economic power.*

BS Old liberalism considers individuals to be rational and well equipped. There is an anthropological optimism in classical liberalism. For example, if we think of Adam Smith, people are well equipped to make the market work. They are rational and guided by their interests in a rational way. That is the classical liberal conception. Neoliberalism arose from the realization that this anthropological optimism is utopian. That it is an idea of theorists disconnected from reality, and that in fact we must look at the biological reality of the human species. And here they take up, in a distorted form, the theory of evolution.

We cannot understand neoliberalism without studying evolutionary theory and Darwinism. In fact, neoliberalism is a distorted form of Darwinism. So they are evolutionists. For them, the human species has adapted to closed and stable environments such as the tribe, the village community, the small town. And then the human species created a new

environment, which is that of globalization. A single open plane, without boundaries, in rapid change. This is the condition of the industrial revolution for neoliberals.

For them, the human brain is not adapted to this new environment that the species has created. So we have a brain that functions in ways that are prehistoric in terms of its relationship to space and time. We are not cognitively, emotionally, or neurologically equipped to cope with the globalization of markets. That is why we need social policy, education policy, and health policy to transform the human species and readapt it through experts in social transformation.

MO *This is very evident in Canada right now, with a government that is very nervous about the economy. It is said that Canadians are too slow to adopt new tech innovations such as AI, for example, and that this reluctance is leading to a significant economic slowdown. But since the political and economic investment in AI is massive, supposedly too big to fail, it is no longer a question of encouraging the public to adopt these new innovations. It is now a process of adaptation. But doesn't this shift from voluntary adoption to enforced adaptation imply a loss of freedom?*

BS You should write a book in Canada called *Il faut adopter !* (We must adopt!) because I wrote *Il faut s'adapter !* (We must adapt!).

MO Yes, “*We must adopt!*” could be a slogan of resistance against forced adaptation. *Adoption implies that we have options and that we proceed with care to make reasoned choices.*

BS There is the same ambivalence in my title (*Il faut s'adapter*), because for Lippmann, adaptation means submission, a loss of freedom, a passive and malleable population. For Dewey, we must also adapt. But for him, “we must adapt” means transforming the world. It means changing the world. The term “adaptation” is very ambiguous. If it means passivity on the part of the population, then it is very dangerous. If, on the other hand, it means what Dewey is trying to impose, namely the active transformation of the environment by living beings, then it becomes interesting and emancipatory.

MO *The question then is, Who has the right, the power, the freedom to transform their environment? It seems to me that the technical milieu is becoming more and more inaccessible, controlled globally by a small handful of very rich people with enormous power over the public. Technologies are becoming increasingly complex and less transparent, less accessible. I recall that in an interview with France Culture, you said that you hate the expression “Je suis nul en informatique” (“I’m useless with computers”). But you didn’t get a chance to explain.*

BS Yes. Very often, this means that technological innovation is necessarily related to intelligence. But it's very easy to show that many technological innovations are poorly designed, poorly thought out, poorly made. They degrade our way of life. And so sometimes not adapting to a computer environment is a sign of intelligence and well-being, while adaptability to whatever happens to be the latest engineer's whim is a sign of submission, passivity, and docility.

Saying “I'm useless at computers” is a caricatural summary of the conflicting relationships between our life imperatives, our health, our needs in terms of living conditions, and the innovations or pseudo-innovations that colonize our environment, sometimes in extremely interesting ways and sometimes in harmful ways. So there is a conflict, and it's very simplistic to settle it by saying “I'm bad at it.” In other words, the problem comes from me and not from the innovations in question.

MO *Perhaps we are all technuls (technolosers) all rendered incapable of transforming our environments because of an asymmetry, a problem of accessibility, a problem of transparency in the technical environment.*

BS Over which we have no control and which is closed off to us. And it's interesting to see that intellectuals, myself included, have chosen Apple. In other words, it's intellectuals, those who are supposed to develop an intelligent relationship with machines, who have chosen machines over which they have no control.

MO *I'm guilty of that too. And why do you think that is?*

BS It's a very clever strategy by Apple because I think the marketing has been excellent. That is, the idea is this: you already have a heavy mental load from your research, so we're going to give you a smooth environment, “a smooth place” where you don't have access to the machine. We're going to relieve you of that mental load. We're going to do a total division of labor. You take care of the humanities and all that, we'll take care of the hard science. And as a result we have intellectuals, myself included, who are useless at computers.

MO *Does that bother you?*

BS Well, I wouldn't be able to change the way I do things.

MO *But you could adapt!*

BS I dream of a world in which intellectuals could resist computer scientists because they would be the programmers themselves.

MO *Let's return to Lipmann's concept of a “structural lag” of the human species, or what you have called “a defect in human material” (263). You always bring us back to biology and biopolitics, very often with reference to Nietzsche's work. How did biological theories inform Nietzsche's philosophy? And is there anything in Nietzsche's biologism that is not in Foucault's biopolitics, for example?*

BS I think Nietzsche has a much more subtle reflection on biology than Foucault. He really worked very closely with biology and understood it as an powerful field in which there were real struggles and internal battles. Whereas Michel Foucault, when he talks about contemporary biology, gives a rather simplistic view of it. For example, he reduces contemporary biology to molecular biology, and he doesn't see at all the conflicts that exist within biology against molecular biology. Nietzsche, on the other hand, saw very clearly that there was an active vision of life as opposed to a passive vision of life. He saw these issues very clearly. He understood very well that biology was an essential field. And he positioned himself within that field, and therefore within those conflicts.

MO *And Nietzsche, because of his knowledge of biology, was able to understand the biopolitical issues of his time.*

BS Yes, he saw very clearly the primacy of adaptationism, he saw very clearly the danger of Spencerism. He saw all that. He identified it. I would add that Michel Foucault developed some very important, very valuable analyses of biopolitics in the 19th and 18th centuries. But he did not see biopolitics in all its 20th-century breadth. He even denied that neoliberalism was biopolitical, since he said that neoliberalism had developed no discourse on life, no discourse on nature, no discourse on *bios*, that neoliberalism was anti-naturalist. And he was trapped by the German view of neoliberalism, which is indeed anti-biological, because of the struggle against the Nazis. But he completely failed to see the biologizing character of American neoliberalism. So he completely missed what I call the third age of biopolitics, which is the neoliberal age.

MO *How can we best confront, or even resist, this third age of biopolitics?*

BS I'll give two answers. First, we have to take neoliberalism seriously. It's a huge, powerful intellectual movement. We have to really appreciate the power of its history. Neoliberalism will soon be 100 years old, a century of intellectual history. And if we caricature neoliberalism as Trump's libertarianism, we don't understand neoliberalism at all. So first of all, we need to take our opponent very seriously. It is our opponent, but we must take it seriously.

And then we need to see how deeply we ourselves are imbued with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has permeated the left wing of the government, it has permeated the

Socialist Party in France, it has completely permeated the American Democrats, who are completely neoliberal with their idea of equal opportunities in competition, equal chances—this is actually neoliberal rhetoric.

Seeing how deeply neoliberalism has permeated our own progressive circles, that's what it means to take neoliberalism seriously and not underestimate it. Because in a struggle, it's always very dangerous to underestimate your opponent and caricature them to make them an easy target. You'll actually miss the target by doing that.

That's the first part of the answer.

The second part of the answer is to try to draw up a political alternative to neoliberalism. And for me, in all my work, the political alternative to neoliberalism is democracy. But that means seriously redefining democracy. It must also be taken seriously as government by the people, a demos, a sovereign people that governs itself and is not governed by experts who adapt it to globalization. A people that sets its own goals and is defined in a new and creative way as it sees fit.

So the real alternative to neoliberalism is democracy, but for that we must take democracy seriously again and not confuse it with the theory of representative government. Most of the time, when we talk about our democracies, when we say, for example, that France is a democracy, we are referring to an elected government, an elitist government based on elections, in which the demos has no power. That is not democracy.

MO *And if I say that this is a utopian idea...*

BS That's a very good objection. And the answer to that must be socio-historical. We must show that there have been real historical precedents for democracy, that democracy has existed, understood as government by the sovereign people. Democracy has existed, and it has existed in a decisive way. It existed in Athens for two centuries. The demos constituted itself and governed itself. It had no leader and no president. There was no king. There was no judge above the demos. There was no law above the demos. The demos was sovereign in an unlimited way. This happened for two centuries, which is no small thing.

And it happened at decisive moments in our history. For example, at the time of the French Revolution, there were powerful democratic impulses to completely reconfigure the country, to completely reconfigure the history of France by imposing the notion of popular sovereignty. And then the Revolution was defeated by the counter-Revolution. Our France today is undergoing revolutionary upheavals. The revolution continues. And counter-revolutionary forces also continue. So history is not over.

This means that democracy is not a utopian idea for the future, but rather a set of socio-historical experiences that must be taken seriously.

And the argument that will immediately be raised against us is that it was possible in Athens because it was a small village. But that's completely false. Athens was a huge city. It had 400,000 inhabitants. It was a demos made up of 100,000 citizens, so it was impossible for the entire demos to discuss things together in the public square. They were faced with the problem of sheer numbers, just like us. And they solved this problem through collective deliberation, through representation. It is always a collective that represents. For example, if the entire demos can never physically meet, it is possible to bring together a large number of the demos, six to ten thousand people on the Pnyx, who will decide for the whole demos. And this avoids the pitfalls of elections, elitism, and the personalization of leaders, through the idea that what best represents us is a collective.

MO *But still, isn't there a problem of scale in this vision of democracy? It might work with 100,000 people. But what about sixty million? And what about their access to communication technology and the globalization of communication?*

BS You can turn the argument around. They managed to communicate with each other for two centuries, when there were no phones or internet, and distances were much greater. For us, we can cross the country in a matter of minutes. For them, it took an extremely long time. So, in fact, distances have been shortened by technology, by modern means of transport, by new communication technologies. On the contrary, we can consider that matters involving large numbers of people are easier to resolve when we have the technological means to abolish or at least shorten distances. So we can completely turn the argument around.

MO *Would such a contemporary collective be diminished, in comparison, by the lack of physical presence induced by new communication technologies?*

BS I think we have to keep in mind that democracy is only possible if a portion of the demos comes together physically somewhere. We have to maintain this face-to-face relationship, this physical relationship that constituted a body. We can't do that all at a distance. We simply have the means. For example, the French Revolution left us a territory divided into dozens of departments. A French department is the scale of Athens, of the city of Athens. It is easy to imagine a hundred Athenian cities deliberating among themselves, then coordinating with each other, then taking turns to hold a central deliberation, changing location to avoid the capital always being the center. It is entirely feasible. It is not done because there is no political will to do so. It is because the current power clings to power, and the current power is based on the leader, the elected representative, the mythology of

the elected representative, the sacred anointing of the elected representative through election.

And so these people who are elected cling to the electoral system, and they have no desire whatsoever to cede their power to the demos. On the contrary, they ask the population not to be a demos but to remain as isolated individuals in the voting booth. We call this the “l’isoloire.” It’s interesting. In other words, everyone should be isolated, individuals. Above all, they should not form a body. The rare times when the demos does form a body, it is in the streets. And in those cases, it is oppressed, it is increasingly prevented from demonstrating thanks to arbitrary arrests and police violence. The goal is to absolutely prevent the streets from becoming something like an active demos.

MO *And at the same time, digital screens isolate us, prevent us from forming a body, from demonstrating in the streets?*

BS From a certain point of view, new technologies isolate us behind our screens, because the more we use them, the more alone we are, locked in our homes in front of the screen. And so we don’t come together as a body, and in your view, there is a dissolution of the demos, an impossibility of forming a people. On the other hand, the Arab Spring and the Gilets jaunes show us that it is with the help of social media that these revolutions or insurrections or pre-insurrections will take place. This shows the potential of these digital tools for mobilization. So it’s more ambiguous than that. I think we should avoid believing in technological determinism. In other words, we should avoid believing that technology determines whether we have a dictatorship or a democracy. I believe it is much more indeterminate, and the way we adapt to it or not is precisely what transforms its political uses.

MO *I find the idea of a democratic adaptation of social media difficult to believe, since these platforms are owned by a very small segment of the public, a super-rich and privileged segment.*

BS Of course. As such, it’s impossible. But social networks themselves can be something like a public service and can also escape their owners. All kinds of things can happen. We saw it with television. Television can be a tool of dictators, and then suddenly the insurgents seize it and bring about revolution in the country. We saw it with radio.

MO *Speaking of the owners of social media, I’ve noticed that American tech giants sometimes invoke Nietzsche in their technophilia. Mark Andreessen, for example, invokes the Übermensch to support the megalomaniacal theories of his “Techno-Optimist Manifesto.” I’ll read you an excerpt: “We believe in accelerationism—the conscious and*

deliberate propulsion of technological development—to ensure the fulfillment of the Law of Accelerating Returns. To ensure the techno-capital upward spiral continues forever.”

BS This is completely unbridled technophilia. This American technophilia is very dangerous. But intellectually, it doesn't give much food for thought. I'm not surprised at all. Nietzsche can give rise to transhumanism if he is misread, since he says that humans must be surpassed.

MO *One could say that, like scientific data, Nietzsche can also be instrumentalized to serve a neoliberal agenda.*

BS Exactly. Except that this completely overlooks the question of suffering in Nietzsche, the question of negativity in Nietzsche, the question of criticism in Nietzsche. It's such a caricatured view that it's not very interesting. For example, Nietzsche's phrase, “What doesn't kill me makes me stronger.” Well, that was picked up by Nike. It's a total caricature.

MO *It was ultimately the telegraph that completely overwhelmed Nietzsche, that challenged his senses, his very human capacity. For us, it's AI that challenges us. What would you say to people today who feel overwhelmed by the persistent nudging to adapt to AI?*

BS What I say in *Nietzsche et la vie* is that what we are facing is nothing new. Once again, it's a matter of putting things into historical context. It was already confronted by people like Nietzsche in the 19th century. So we don't have to start from scratch, we don't have to start with public health year zero. We need to look back to the past, to all the thinking that has gone before us, rather than acting as if this is something new and unique.