

Research Article

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Disposal and Reinvention: Citizenship in an Era of Electronic Capitalism

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Abstract: Ever since the expansion of video-politics, television canalises citizens' criticism and demands regarding political authorities, conceiving of citizens as spectators. Social networks magnify this type of involvement, promising horizontality and social cohesion. Political parties have become reduced to elites that distribute power and benefits among themselves, disengaging from voters, except during electoral periods. Our opinions and behaviours are captured by algorithms and subject to globalised forces. The public space where citizenship should be exercised is becoming opaque and distant. Citizenship is radically diminishing while some social movements are reinventing themselves and winning sectorial battles: for human rights, for gender equality, against authoritarianism. Yet the neoliberal approach to technology maintains and deepens greater inequalities. What are the alternatives to this dispossession? Hackers and dissenters? What is the role of the vote in a State-society relationship reprogrammed by technologies and the market?

Keywords: Citizenship, democracy, electronic capitalism, algorithms, dispossession, participation, Who cares about citizens?

Who Cares about Citizens?

“Until a few years ago, one sensed that politicians were only interested in citizens in their role as voters. In the last Mexican election campaign, debates and insults between the candidates suggested the one thing that mattered was the fight between them”—a pollster from a Mexican consulting firm told me this in May 2018, weeks before the election of the country's president, governors, and legislators.

“The media are aimed at viewers as clients, even in political analysis programs”—says an Argentine communications specialist. “All they worry about is increasing ratings to attract advertisers.”

What do citizens want of, and for, themselves? The percentages of people voting in Spanish, Italian, Peruvian, and other elections fell in 2017 and 2018. Faced with an apparent inability to govern the conflicts generated by precarious labor, high unemployment, assassinations, sexual violence, rape, and a lack of public safety, added to revelations of political corruption, the cry that resonated in the streets during the Argentine financial catastrophe of 2001—“throw them all out”—had begun to echo around the West.

Such mistrust in politics and politicians leads to doubts about democracy itself. The truckers who paralysed the circulation of food, medicine, and fuel across Brazil for two weeks in May 2018, furious over price increases in gasoline and diesel, called for “military intervention.” In that country, as in Mexico and

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others with abject governments, seemingly powerless in the face of tens of thousands of violent deaths each year and mafia control of whole swathes of territory, human-rights organizations and well-known public voices are calling for intervention by international institutions, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations.

Such widespread despair is not created over just one or two years. And its replication internationally brings into question partially-useful explanations founded in the particularities of specific national histories. An entire system—or what we thought of as one—is collapsing.

This unravelling of citizenship has multiple causes: the increasingly elite nature of parties and their disconnection from the grassroots; the commodification of the media, which has diminished their social function; and citizens' perceptions that their protests and hardships are not heard or seen by the authorities. Being a citizen no longer means what it was—or at least, was imagined to be—in earlier stages of capitalism. We live in different times when politics means dissolving previous agreements between states, companies, and human rights that gave meaning to the modern, democratic conception of citizenship. This amounts to a decomposition of the very idea of democracy, or what Wendy Brown calls “de-democratization” (Brown).

The impact of *fake news* and other contradictions and manipulations that separate discourse from material reality looks like a radically new moment in history, caused by technological transformations in the production of knowledge, the dissemination of information, and access to it. I shall argue here that this disabling of citizenship supposedly generated by fake news has its antecedents in earlier processes. For we are dealing with ruptures and discontinuities that are not only technological but also consequences of the cognitive reorganisation of capitalism (Lash, Moulier Boutang, Lins Ribeiro). It is a more radical and complex process than theorised in Marxism, and by Marx himself, namely the dissociation between words and their use in ideological operations.

These changes in knowledge and its digital circulation are due not only to capitalism but to a wholesale reconfiguration of social, cultural and democratic governance. They require us to recognise these other dimensions as constituent parts of the formation in which we live. Unlike sociological analysis and political philosophy dedicated to examining our democratic crisis in terms of legitimacy, and party, business, and media elites, I prefer a different perspective on citizenship. Following the position enunciated by David Harvey when he talks about “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey), I want to analyse the loss of meaning in language and the subsumption of the free choice of citizenship conduct as a consequence of capital and algorithms. I shall ask what new forms of exploitation develop when acts of consumption, political participation, and artistic and social creativity are expropriated by Big Data.

A Prehistory of De-Democratization

It is necessary, first of all, to relativise the overwhelming novelty that is attributed to the diminution of citizen powers by cognitive capitalism. Let's briefly review changes in the relationship of the media with citizenship and consumption in the pre-digital era.

Those of us educated in the second half of the 20th century were told that citizenship was held and exercised through membership of a community that inhabited a territory. Being born in Argentina, Brazil, or France gave us the right to live and travel in those countries, to be educated, to work, and to interact with other citizens and with foreigners in accordance with national laws. To guarantee these rights, there were governments, political parties and unions, *fora* in which necessary transformations and differences could be disputed. In Latin America, military coups periodically negated democratic life, but they were experienced as interruptions, after which we could imagine ourselves again as citizens.

In the last few decades, those *coups* have ceased, but other processes have diminished faith in the doctrines and underpinnings of citizenship. Forms of governing and participating began to merge with anti-democratic tendencies across the West, unsettling many countries and making us doubt that we can act as free citizens, capable of effective action.

The massive expansion of television, for example, created video politics. Debates and the formation of public opinion moved from squares and streets to screens. This audiovisual mediation distanced politicians from voters and reduced the role of the press, and print culture more generally. Protest marches continued, but the media referred to them almost exclusively as disruptions to urban life rather than ideological statements.

In addition, the key functions of nation-states—governing the economy and communications, managing imports and exports—were transferred to international organisations. Sometimes, rights were expanded as we became citizens of Mercosur or the European Union; but globalisation, driven by economic and financial actors, moved goods and television messages across borders more easily than people.

The internet's planetary flows bring together processes that formerly went in different directions. They have extended the horizon of communications and access to entertainment and multicultural information, creating forms of international solidarity between alternative social movements struggling against the censorship and repression of national governments. But the principal providers of these services also spy on us. Google, Facebook, and Twitter—by making private life public, by selling our data and revealing our opinions and tastes—transfer our ability to choose and make decisions to anonymous entities.

The new mobilisation of the media in relation to audiences and renewed use of marketing techniques to capture and mobilise their tastes have stolen away citizen initiative and resistance. This expropriation of the digital age—and the ability of large corporations to guide or reduce the interactivity of users—has hastened a process that began more than half a century ago.

In order to understand these new conditions for the exercise of citizenship, we need to examine changes in a socio-cultural sense, not just in terms of technological change. Since the 1980s, research has illustrated the intermingled way in which we act as consumers and citizens (Anderson, 1983, Douglas and Isherwood, 1990, García Canclini, 1995). The exercise of citizenship was always associated with the ability to appropriate goods and ways of using them, but it was assumed that these differences could be levelled out thanks to the equality of abstract rights concretised through voting, in order to have one's interests represented by a political party or union. Along with the decomposition of politics and disbelief in its institutions, other modes of participation have gained in strength. Men and women perceive that many personal yet public citizen questions—where I belong and what rights does that give me, how can I inform myself, and who represents my interests—are answered by the private consumption of goods and the media rather than the abstract concepts of democracy or collective participation in public space.

Consumption is good for thinking. It is not the place of irrationality or simple, compulsive acts. When we select goods and appropriate them, we define what we consider publicly valuable, decide how we integrate and distinguish ourselves in society, and link our income to our needs and desires. Nor is citizenship just a reasoned exercise of conviction: the management of political campaigns is done with marketing cunning and advertising tactics that appeal more to emotions than a reasoned understanding of conflicts.

The divisions among those who consume in one way or another diminish the illusion of equal rights of citizens as defined in universal, legally-established terms. We have discovered that we divide the neighbourhoods in which we live by our use of collective or individual transportation, the colour of our skin, and the clothes we wear. New demands emerge for rights at work and in consumption in terms of ethnic identity, gender or age. Today, we not only defend the equality of all but rather the right to be different. We affirm ourselves as young people, women, gays, the elderly, the disabled, or ethnic minorities—not as citizens in general. One even refers today to cultural citizenship, based on different forms of emancipation (Rosaldo, Miller).

To the extent that political parties are incapable of incorporating these sectoral interests, they lose the ability to bring people together, disaffection for politics increases, and the exercise of citizenship moves from large institutions to movements or groups, to local or community organisations. Sometimes this process is interpreted as depoliticisation; but as Norbert Lechner said in a keynote twenty years ago, people invest in organisations that are closer to their experience and can operate as self-help groups.

The Media Bring Us Closer, Yet Further Apart

These new forms of social life and public agenda-setting converge with the growing role of the press, radio, television, and the internet as platforms for complaints, denunciations, criticism of the authorities, and the expression of opinions. There is much discussion of the social and political power wielded by Fox and CNN in the US, Televisa in Mexico, and Globo in Brazil; but these corporations are not limited to capturing audiences and negotiating with other governments, or forming citizens' opinions about economic policy. Television and social networks also capture social dissatisfaction, tailoring information with persuasive styles designed to appeal to particular affective communities and identities.

Disappointed by state, party, and union bureaucracies, the public turns to radio and television to obtain what those institutions fail to provide: services, justice, reparations—or simply attention. No one would argue that phone-in shows or TV programs with studio audiences are more efficacious than public bodies, but they fascinate because they show large organisations listening. People feel they do not have to “stick to delays, deadlines, procedures, and formalities that defer or transfer needs.... The television world is fast and seemingly transparent, whereas the institutional scene is slow and its forms (precisely what make the existence of institutions possible) complicated through an opacity that generates despair” (Sarlo 83, also Winocur).

The role of the media, especially television, has been investigated by communication studies since the seventies. Over that period, it has become more complex, for four reasons:

1. The parties delegate part of their electoral and governmental promotional campaigns to marketing companies.
2. The media are manipulated by politicians and governments but have discovered that they need to show a relative autonomy from those forces in order to maintain the trust of their audiences. In addition, amidst the loss of faith in the institutions of government and justice to address crime, corruption and unequal income, the media appear—with the power of their filming and recording—as privileged, quick witnesses, capable of filling this gap in public credibility. They replace the norms of justice by simply declaring the guilt of people: it seldom seems to matter whether they provide evidence or even pseudo-evidence.
3. The media scene expands its sociopolitical role with the emergence of social networks: a) they redistribute the microphone and camera, generating the sensation that anyone can act as citizen, prosecutor, and judge; b) they make everyone insecure by showing that personal conduct, from a collision on a corner to the offer and acceptance of bribes, can be filmed and disseminated massively; c) the vulnerability and impotence of citizens increase when we feel not only that our communications can be recorded and publicly exposed, but the sum of our behaviour and desire combined in algorithms. That knowledge covers even the most intimate matters and is organised by unknown global forces that channel our actions as consumers and citizens. The public space where citizenship should be exercised, despite being so visible, paradoxically becomes ever more opaque and distant.
4. Without being exhaustive, it is worth noting one more factor: the correlation between the “collaboration” of users in providing free information about their opinions to designers of political campaigns and that given by consumers to corporations when they generate innovative products. Sharing information and productive innovations are two complementary modalities. They generate wealth in capitalism and power in politics. The subordinate role of users, citizens, and innovators is concealed by naming them as prosumers, the “creative crowd,” or intelligent communities operating in networks (Boutang). But the economic and symbolic analysis of the appropriation that companies make of the value generated in social networks, blogs, Youtube videos and productive initiatives reveals that they are exploiting an unpaid labour force. However, these strategies of accumulation by dispossession, in Harvey's sense, do not simply mean a loss for users. Their ambiguity is that, simultaneously, they provide those very people with services that have both signs and effects. The information we upload to Facebook, the photos shared on Instagram, and the alerts with which users of Waze warn of excessive traffic or a demonstration are reconverted into Waze services for other drivers—and data on how to control protestors (Reygadas).

Are There Citizens in the Digital World?

Numerous critical studies of the last half-century have theorised and studied the media. They are useful for analysing these new scenarios, anticipating the massive capacity to model information (among others, Strauss), as well as the interaction with active reception and the uses and gratifications of audiences (Lull, Martín Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones*, Orozco *et al.*). We need to redispense and revise such contributions now in order to account for the reorganisation of labour and communication under *cognitive capitalism*.

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro observes that the expropriation of knowledge and innovations to develop accumulation already existed under industrial capitalism. He maintains that our contemporary differences derive from the expansion of computing and the internet: lucrative new practices appear via productive and managerial models, emergent discourses, and the establishment of hegemony. To act successfully in today's world necessitates the use of devices capable of articulating many modes of access to information and communication. In this capitalism, which Lins Ribeiro prefers to call electronic-computing, "within a short period, every person will be a smartphone" (Lins Ribeiro 19).

We know that this device condenses a multiplicity of functions, which are effectively managed by one giant company: Google. How does Google interact with users? It organises large volumes of information and makes them universally accessible, partly free of charge, through Gmail, Google Maps, Google Earth, Waze, and YouTube. What kind of service does this management of words, images, and sounds provide? Lins Ribeiro highlights one particular function: words become merchandise. Remember that certain words used to have commercial value, for example in the form of books, magazines, or newspapers; now, "any word that can be associated with goods or services has a value. Currently, the price of words is disembodied: it is no longer a literary creation" (Lins Ribeiro 23). In noting that words are transformed into search signs and algorithmically articulated in "an electronic market panopticon," he explains how the information we give Google about our behaviours, desires, and opinions turns us into commodified inputs. Perhaps we should talk about new ways of incarnating words, which refer not only to literary creation but to the corporal, experiential support of users that occurs when, by activating search signs, they signal who they are, believe themselves to be, or wish to become.

Lins Ribeiro calls the exchange between the gift (the service that Google provides) and what we give it (our most personal information) the economy of the bait. This alludes to the way in which electronic capitalism incorporates us as embodied forms: hooking us and subjecting our tastes and intimate thoughts to traces that are beyond our control. This labour economy is sustained thanks to the unpaid work of users' clicks and corporeal dispositions.

Given the opacity of algorithms versus the transparency of our data, it is not only the labour link that is asymmetrical and unequal; our very ability to function as citizens is brought into doubt. The utopia of asking for accountability for the use that algorithms make of our information leads to more extreme questions than at any previous time about the type of hegemony that is being installed. In the old Gramscian distinction, hegemony was differentiated from domination by not being a simple imposition, but control justified by consensus, taking into account the needs and desires of subalterns. Maurice Godelier found that domination in African societies was "justified" by the services that political leaders or religious leaders offered to subordinates—and read Western democracies in this key (Godelier). Several authors, Raymond Williams among others, highlight the role of cultural processes as scenes of persuasion and negotiation between the dominating and the dominated, where subaltern or popular sectors exercise their resistance and develop alternative initiatives to hegemonic groups (Grimson and Varela, Sunkel, Martín Barbero, *La educación desde la comunicación*). But this management of social antagonism and the place of culture in mediating and elaborating conflicts is changing with the digital reorganisation of social interaction.

New networks construct a game between the power of the server and the user. It differs from the one established and administered by the principal transnational media corporations. In an era when audiovisual products are designed and engineered from distant places by Hollywood and transnational television, new digital offerings rely on interactivity which I can (partially) create and access when and where I want. That participation confers on digital circuits the appearance of a democratising power.

Israel Márquez and Elisenda Ardévol propose a distinction between *democratisation* and *demotization*. For example, like other such networks, YouTube gives visibility and opportunities for participation, but “there is no transfer of media power” (Márquez and Ardévol, 2018: 40). Celebrity is redistributed, but what ordinary people generate is ultimately appropriated by the media in a conventional manner. Industries continue to control the symbolic economy and administer it for the benefit of increasingly concentrated economic interests.

If I cannot change the system, can I at least showcase my creativity, my ideas, my desire to forge alternative communities and share information without being sold anything? I am grouping together here activities of unequal social value, because one of the characteristics of YouTube since its purchase by Google is to homogenise different individual and group conduct, ordering or institutionalising how people behave, and in no sense disrupting the rules or the power of traditional media. Moreover, we see that many independent initiatives facilitated by digital technologies are quickly and easily abducted by publishers of texts and music and traditional television networks. Since Google acquired YouTube and information from newspapers and TV channels has become fed by and into networks, amateur videos that were once shown in an ad-free environment have been all-too-easily reincorporated into a commercial logic and placed in competition with those produced by corporations: “the large media corporations are colonizing the Internet and taking advantage of their ‘old’ power structures,” argue Márquez and Ardévol, “to appropriate ‘new’ media such as YouTube and ‘new’ cultural phenomena represented by youtubers” (Márquez and Ardévol 42).

Drawing on more examples than I can summarise here, these authors highlight the fate of dissenting and participatory communications. Like youtubers and the networks that represent them, such progressive tendencies are falling under the control of the same old capitalist corporations, “generating a situation of control and media hegemony not very different from the era—predigital—of mass communication” (Márquez and Ardévol 43). I agree in part with this assessment. However, the ways of participating in the production of programs, of generating data about audiences and interacting between senders and receivers or between recipients and users have changed enough for this reorganisation of power to be more than a simple continuation of the mass communication industries in an unchanged way.

Márquez and Ardévol are careful to recognise that hacker culture and free software communities are counterhegemonic forces that question the prevailing technological, political, and economic hegemony. They mention Anonymous as an example of a defiant alternative model to the Hollywood individual celebrity (which is perpetuated in the ratings fantasies of youtubers). It transcends individual celebrity in the name of “a collective and protective pseudonym that acts as a shared common identity” (Márquez and Ardévol 45).

Perhaps we can risk a hypothesis at this point: *by their very format and interactive flows, the irruption of networks is engendering modes of communication and association that are neither hegemonic nor counterhegemonic, but beyond both the hegemonic intentions of companies and the counterhegemonic desires of progressives. In the subsequent reconfiguration of power disputes, ambivalent, hybrid combinations appear. Forms of sociability are elaborated. Power does not have a binary structure, but rather a dispersed complexity. There are many ways of being together, communicating, and sharing or contesting assets.*

In these networks, we share information with friends; we exhibit photos or memes to gain and enjoy prestige; we advertise and sell goods; our resources are expropriated to share them (hackers) or otherwise obtain economic benefit (piracy); and, of course, we participate in the bait economy, where we are offered “False gifts,” as Luis Reygadas calls them: free access or services in exchange for information from users (Reygadas 74).

These processes are not reducible to binary oppositions: lucrative or non-lucrative practices, legal or illegal, cooperative or competitive, hegemonic or popular. In some interactions, a particular form of conduct prevails, but actors with different purposes are often mixed or embraced. Just as not everything involves altruistic, reciprocal, and community-based non-profit relationships and these exchanges include the search for status, prestige, and power, the formal economy is often nurtured in the informal. Profitable and illegal practices are linked with ideas of equal, non-exploitative partnerships.

The dynamism of such changes also moves the boundaries between the lawful and the unlawful: think of the debates between what companies or lawyers judge to be piracy, but users conceive of as free downloading of texts, images, and music. For that reason, Reygadas proposes that we understand these relationships and definitions on a continuum, rather than with clear distinctions between the licit and the illicit. Among those who defend a conception with a strong emphasis on property and privacy, and, at the other extreme, people who emphasise the shared use of what they define as common goods, grey areas are formed, and varied interactions combine. For example, says Reygadas, the activity of those who work on Wikipedia is both the creation of common goods and a contest for prestige.

The question I am posing—whether citizens exist in this time of digital hegemony—is susceptible to several responses, in which the very notion of citizenship is modified. We can face one aspect of this new type of citizenship thanks to a discussion between Étienne Balibar and Wendy Brown. Balibar says “neoliberalism is not just an ideology, but a mutation of the very nature of politics, produced by actors located in all areas of society. It is actually the birth of an extreme paradox in political activity, a job that doesn’t merely tend to neutralize as completely as possible the element of *conflict*—essential in its classic sense—but to deprive politics of all meaning in advance, and create the conditions of a society where the actions of individuals and groups (even when they are *violent*) depend on a single criterion: quantifiable utility. This is not so much to do with politics as *antipolitics*, a neutralisation, or the preventive abolition, of socio-political antagonism” (Balibar 169).

Marx’s Self-censorship

The de-democratisation that Brown talks about refers to how the current type of governmentality calls for a “free” subject, supposedly capable of deliberating rationally, choosing, opposing, and responsibly taking on the consequences of his or her actions. Citizens are thought of as individual entrepreneurs who are responsible for their welfare.

How can one justify, asks Balibar, neoliberalism cancelling the idea of “active citizenship” as per classic liberalism—removing its political meaning and delegating it to the subjectivity of individual actors? The potential success of Brown’s proposal lies in the possibility of inventing “*another historical solution* to the problems of the adaptation of the subject to capitalism, or of individual behaviour to the politics of capital. The hypothesis that we previously conceived—of a crisis of social citizenship as a model of the configuration of the political—a crisis that would come not only from the ‘revenge of the capitalists’ or the deterioration of the correlation of forces between socialism and its adversaries but the evolution of the internal contradictions of social citizenship—assumes great importance here. Such a hypothesis encourages us to conceive the possibility of political regimes that are not only *mediocrely democratic* (to the extent compatible with a reproduction of the structures of inequality: what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls *low intensity democracy*); or *anti-democratic* (according to the model of dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, or historical fascism); but, in fact, *a-democratic*, in the sense that universalizable rights (which we have grouped under the name of equal-freedom) no longer play any role in their functioning and development (even in their capacity as resistance forces or of opposition)” (Balibar 175).

Balibar finds significant analogies and differences between this thesis of Brown and what he calls “Marx’s nightmare.” Remember that in an unpublished chapter of *Capital*, Marx outlined the “real subsumption” of the labour force in capitalist relations. Why did Marx discard this analysis?

The implications would have been disastrous for the idea of a *proletarian politics*. To the detriment of any prospect of revolutionary organization or even collective consciousness of the working class, Marx would have returned to the alternative of a weakened politics or a messianic solution that arose from the destruction of the very conditions of politics—and he had not stopped moving away from his youthful proposals for a “decomposition of civil-bourgeois society. (Balibar 179)

The “real submission” interview by Marx in the unpublished chapter means capitalism is no longer just a “consumption of the labour force,” whose objective is to maximize productivity through the development

of various “methods” of exploitation of workers or extortion of surplus labour, but to convert itself into a system for the *(re) production of the labor force itself as a commodity*, which unites its “qualities” to make them “usable” and “manageable” in a given production system, conditioning the “capacities,” “needs,” and “desires of individuals” (Balibar 179).

How might we revise this “apocalyptic” vision of Marx, given today’s tendencies towards de-democratisation and the establishment, in the Foucauldian sense, of a new cultural ‘rationality’ and citizenship? This tendency must be examined, Balibar suggests, in connection with contemporary ways of producing *voluntary servitude*. In other words, “as the ‘rational’ or ‘rationalizable’ effects of anonymous technologies, micropowers and daily behaviours that are both those of the ‘dominant’ and those of the ‘dominated,’ located within a certain normality” (Balibar 180).

Balibar also emphasises the power of the simulacrum as an ontological feature of the virtual, which in a certain way is exacerbated with the conversion of politics into “biopolitics,” that is when “naked life” becomes the horizon of subjection to power. *Simulacrum* and *naked life* are the key issues for Jean Baudrillard (after Plato) and Giorgio Agamben (after Foucault). Balibar is more attracted to Negri and Hardt (in *Empire*, then *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*) when they seek to reverse those apocalyptic themes in a positive way, based on an interpretation of the “virtual” as *immateriality of work*, albeit achieved at the price of an unlimited extension of the “biopolitical.” He says the analysis of historical-political processes is frequently “ensnared” between two eschatologies: “one, nihilistic; the other, redemptive” (Balibar 181).

Balibar goes so far as to posit an intrinsic link between this reversal of democratic demands and the intensification of procedures for *controlling* individual existence, geographical displacement, opinions, and social conduct. Those procedures resort to increasingly sophisticated technologies, with territorial or communicational bases, either national or transnational; what Gilles Deleuze had already diagnosed as a society of control that extends to a sort of “generalized census, in real time, of internet users (including the intermediation of “social networks” such as Twitter or Facebook, which begin by selling the ‘profiles’ of individual users to companies)” (Balibar 182).

Within French thought, Robert Castel rehearses another interpretation. He refers to the procedures that dismantle “social security” by attacking the solidarity and socialisation that made possible the *affiliation* of individuals over generations to a “community of citizens,” as *negative individualism*. “Disaffiliated” individuals confront contradictory imposts. They should behave like “entrepreneurs of the self,” following the new neoliberal values code, thereby exhibiting an autonomy whose conditions of possibility are nevertheless simultaneously removed and inaccessible.

What is Lost with De-democratization

We can now discuss, in a different way, whether the reorganisation of techno-social rationality leaves gaps for unimagined actions that elude technological control. Idealistic defences of the ultimate liberty of subjects, as if there were some impenetrable remnant of intimacy, are no longer valid. Nor is it enough to doubt the ability of polls to predict and manipulate how voters behave; they are often wrong. The main question is not how to improve these surveys, but whether we are condemned to a politics that is all about data engineering. Is emancipation possible in a digitised society?

Let’s try to understand the attraction of a technophilic vision of the world. Promoters of the sharing/gig economy, encouraged by the expansion of Uber and Airbnb, imagine how to extend this model and thereby save on labour and other costs. The combination of software, internet, and crowds, they tell us, will make it easier to automate and redistribute millions of micro-activities around the world.

Such reduced social and intercultural complexity promises to overcome differences between ways of thinking, feeling, producing, consuming, and making decisions, by converting them into algorithms. The variations between cultures, and between subjects within each culture, will lose importance with this translation of different social logics into genetic and electronic codes: biology will merge with history, predicts Yuval Noah Harari, a favourite of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Who can doubt this will happen, he claims, when “most of our planet is already the legal property of non-human intersubjective entities,

that is, nations and companies” (Harari 355).

But supplanting citizens by strategies of subordination does not seem to eliminate resistance movements. How will the labour market change? Will humans still be needed, but not individuals, understood as autonomous beings? People may become, in this conception, “collections of biochemical mechanisms that are constantly supervised and guided by a network of electronic algorithms” (Harari 361).

Two comments: What is credible about this utopia/dystopia—partly realised—is the diminished priority accorded in modernity to nation-states and their territorial subjects. The anonymous entities that access our communications are growing, and they know more than we do about how we interact locally, nationally and globally, and how that information is distributed and concealed. They establish globalised systems of behaviour and initiatives to modify them as well as new modes of sovereignty, which we experience when using Google, Yahoo, Waze and all their brothers, their Big Brothers. We are talking about computer “subjects” no longer located in singular territories that sell and distribute our data without consulting us.

Yet we also see new types of citizen action. For example, there are demands that server farms perform at a high level. Protests are aimed at Google because of the pages they allow that deny the Holocaust or denigrate women. Complaints are made to Facebook for transmitting false information during the Brexit campaign and the US presidential elections, which forced them to evaluate more closely what they disseminate. Can algorithms control the veracity of information and instruct users how to check it? Experts like Walter Quattrocchi maintain that it is necessary to educate users, including journalists, so that they operate as critical mediators and give a leading role to academic institutions in the public sphere. It is obvious that the task of being a citizen is changing all the time (Domenech 24).

A significant breakthrough occurred with the European Parliament’s 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). It requires companies operating in Europe or dealing with European citizens to change “their focus on the value of data from the quantitative to the qualitative: it is no longer about how much information you have, but about how you got it and how it can be used. Beyond concrete measures, this supposes above all a change in the culture of management, with greater training and sensitivity,” says Rafael García, from the international area of the Spanish Agency for Data Protection (AEPD).

“The regulation makes responsibility proactive,” explains José Luis Piñar, a data-protection delegate of the General Council of the Bar (a post created by the GDPR). “In other words, instead of managing files, we must explain why decisions are made about data flows. Everything must be documented, and management systems must be designed with privacy in mind.” In addition, the regulation develops the right to be forgotten, which has existed since a 2014 ruling of the European Court of Justice.

Almost all companies, large and small, are changing their systems of management information that cover their customers. Failure to comply can be very expensive: the fines can be equivalent to 4% of turnover or 20 million euros, whichever is greater. Firms also know from the experience of Facebook that neglecting the rights of users can damage one’s digital reputation. The minimal achievements of consumer organisations to affect radio and television change in scope and meaning when citizenship is exercised in networks.

How do the Social Sciences and Philosophy Participate in the Current Conjuncture?

The first inclination of some anthropologists and communication scholars was to look for cultural and subjective differences not captured by databases, to uncover face-to-face interactions that remained indecipherable by algorithms. In this post-liberal world, in which individual decisions will vanish, says Harari, “some people will remain both indispensable and indecipherable, but they will constitute a privileged and reduced elite” (Harari 318). And a form of elite knowledge will not principally benefit young people: the most qualified to use digital technologies will also suffer the greatest job insecurity and social vulnerability (Hopenhagen).

This new inequity, indifferent to the rights that generally spring from being knowledgeable, reveals that technological and communication innovations acquire different meanings when interacting with

social relations and established inequalities. At the same time, expectations about the emancipatory role of socio-digital networks are contradicted by the hyper-surveillance that accompanies them. This force, with greater capacity for global expansion than in any other period of communications, does not solve—and often aggravates—intercultural conflicts.

We have overestimated the redemptive role of the new techno-social rationality says Harari, to the point where one can speak of a “religion of data.” This emergent religion, “dataism,” assumes that different cultures are diverse patterns of data flow that can be analysed using the same concepts and tools (Harari, part III). Humans are incapable of covering such immense flows of data. But perhaps there are still some tasks we must face as men and women because electronic algorithms do not pose them. Does it make any sense to distinguish between public and private, democratic and authoritarian systems, when the majority of voters do not know enough biology and cybernetics to form relevant opinions? Neither our rulers nor future surveys and algorithms can solve or control the new conflicts. So freedom of information is not granted to humans but to freedom of information, asks Harari. Perhaps we are present at a strange transfer of power: just as capitalists once assigned it to the invisible hand of the market, dataists believe in the invisible hand of the flow of data. As in the criticism of that supposed abstract and wise power of the market—in which we learned to discover logos, and behind the logos, disguised social forces—an anthropology attentive to the diversity of experiences can now detect that life is not reduced to processing data and making quantitative decisions.

The answers to the intercultural and societal challenges offered by sociometry and biotechnology cannot prevent international geopolitics from becoming an interdependency of fear. Other countries with which we increase trade, tourism, and academic exchanges, and from which we take music and medical resources to expand our cultural horizon, are presented as threatening referents. These exchanges are full of suspicion. Along with economic and technological interdependency come ethnonationalism, separatism amongst regions, and warlike destruction of difference.

What can philosophy contribute to these dilemmas: the alleged rationality of markets, consumption, and citizenship in a world of political and military conflicts between nations? It is useful to pick up on a debate over the last great hegemonic narrative in the social sciences before neoliberalism and dataism—that is, structuralism. It sought universal laws through kinship, myths, and other symbolic systems, going so far as to cover economic and political order, but failed to encapsulate the remainders, the waste, which were left to other interpretations.

As per structuralism, social exchanges are now conceived as systems of language, with information and communication structured independently of the actions of subjects. Computing makes it possible to capture, classify, and operate much larger data systems than was the case when Claude Lévi-Strauss decoded myths. Studying and solving urban or communication problems is partly facilitated by the internet, but new complexities arise, because biology, medicine, and psychology not only aspire to cure the sick but also to decipher and modify genes, sensations, and emotions, understood as algorithms.

In this new process of knowledge, we can deepen the question that Paul Ricoeur asked of Levi-Strauss: we admit that decoding algorithms allows us to grasp the meaning of biological and social structures and the symbolic structures with which we imagine our behaviours and relationships with others. But what is the sense of meaning (Ricoeur), the meaning we give to structures by understanding ourselves as individual and collective subjects, by differentiating ourselves from others and choosing between different ways of living together? This is not a question of returning to any subjectivism, or the illusion of an unconditioned consciousness, free from the demands of objectivity that cannot be renounced in scientific work. Rather, it deals with the options that multiply from understanding and using the structures that are captured by algorithms. The inequalities, contradictions, and inconsistencies of our societies do not authorise—in this time when so many structures expire—the naive belief that the passage from old orders to new ones occurs without the intervention of privileged actors. Neither material nor symbolic markets are self-regulating.

Reinventing Citizenship

The persistence of conflicts and the renewal of social movements that intervene in them indicates that these tensions are not some simple dispossession of the citizenry by the neutralising capacity of algorithms. I return, then, to the affirmation that networks generate new forms of participation that are difficult to categorise as straightforwardly hegemonic or counterhegemonic. Citizen activism is not simply absorbed by the media and networks; different sociabilities continue to mix ambiguously. Along with the weakening of classical citizenship (voting + economic, political, and cultural activism + questioning national power systems) came the emergence and growth of what we might call sectoral citizenship: of women and other demands of gender, of young people, migrants, neighbours, retirees, pensioners, etc.

The triumph of neoliberalism reorganised regressively the links between capital, labour and social demands, accentuating the internal and external inequality of nations. It was also strengthened through a sociocultural victory, imposing its economic-financial model as “the only option,” which led to the disempowerment of unions, leftist parties, and other opposition forces. But the opposition struck back via struggles in favour of freer sexuality, plural ways of forming families, the decriminalisation of abortion, and extending human rights to migrants. Along with a certain “naturalisation” of inequality and economic exploitation came the unexpected coefficient of a denaturalisation of gender oppression, racism, nationalist fundamentalism, and authoritarian education.

By denaturalising devices of oppression, even in local and global scenes where economic and political defeats occur, one can discern the (partial) dismantling of sociocultural domination. Of course, we must admit that these socio-cultural changes are also ambivalent: the de-democratizing processes of capitalism (insecurity and the expansion of organized crime, job precariousness, increased migration of the poorest as wars threaten their well-being) generate xenophobia, tendencies towards dictatorship—desires to erase political democracy and impose military “solutions.”

The expansion of communication networks has proven decisive in this denaturalisation, igniting an extended and globalised social consciousness. But again, as well as democratising and generating solidarity, these processes also multiply and intensify fears. And sectoral victories only suspend a collective questioning of capitalism. For the conflicts that I am calling ‘sectoral’ always involve socio-economic injustice: some feminist movements also attack unequal salaries between men and women, while the generation of precarious work by young people and migrants is compounded, generation after generation. The question that remains is whether those causes can rearticulate their discontent to transform the neoliberal globalisation that is empowered through the electronic redesign of socio-political structures.

Translated by Toby Miller

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