ICT AND SOCIAL CHANGE: FATE OR CHOICE, AND WHO MAKES THE CHOICE?

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Abstract

The article identifies contradictions and ambiguities at all levels of the present social changes in order to exploit them and nurture the "culture of choice" we may practice. Ambiguity gives rise to alternative perspectives, which may help us to better understand the social processes in the so called "Information Society" and knowledge industry, avoiding the technological determinism that is so often called forth nowadays. Our research should explore relations between structure and culture, gender, and individual and social groups to highlight differences instead of common values and behaviours, and to enforce the possibility to choose among the different alternatives. Research should also be focused on the subjects able to make the choice and, finally, practice the change they choose. The article tries to single out the problems that arise among the "autonomous workers" who are constantly increasing their presence in the labour market and the problems that arise among the people who try to use innovatively the "old" and the "new" media.

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I greatly appreciate the title of this colloquium because of its ambiguity. At first glance, it seems to ask: Is there something yet to research in the communication territories? But alternatively the question may also be interpreted as: What kind of research can the Left still carry on in the communication territories?

I think we should systematically single out contradictions and ambiguities and look deep into them when we consider the social and cultural reality of the so called "Information Society," because if the last century pretended to be the time of answers, the new century, our present time, appears to be the time of questions. To raise questions and to explore every side of their contents could be the best way to fight the technological determinism and the fatalistic view which so often inspire the "Information Society" theories. Laura Marx once asked her father which the best rule for life was in his opinion, and Marx answered, "to doubt everything". A very good rule, I believe, especially when we think about research.

Contradiction and Ambiguity: The Culture of Choice

We find ourselves, nowadays, as Nicholas Garnham writes

> *between the two extremes of, on one hand, a position that sees not only all media development, but now also social development in general in the form of the Information Society, as a technological determined, even if emancipatory, fate and, on the other, a social constructivism which fails to confront the real limitation placed upon human action by material constraints and thus sees technological development as purely an ideological struggle* (Garnham 2000, 54).

We must carry out our research, I think, to fight this false alternative and find ways to contribute to planting and stimulating what I call "the culture of choice" (Cesareo 1995). That is, an attitude, in thinking and in action, that singles out contradictions and ambiguities at all levels of social change and works on them. Not to overcome the contradictions but to set them off and exploit them; and to get advantage out of the better, democratic side of the ambiguous social and technological processes that are going on.

Carrying out this kind of research, by the way, can help actual social and political movements who – as recently occurred in Amsterdam during the festival Next Five Minutes – try to confront the perspectives and the possible alternative use of new media.

The research I refer to should explore, in the first place, relations at all levels; such as the observation of the network systems, the theories of complexity and the theory of sexual difference (Diotima 1987; Muraro 1994) which help us to understand changing relations between structure and culture, changing individual and group relations between sexes.

These research streams are meaningful today in that they help to highlight and explain differences instead of common values and behaviours.

To explore relations is essential especially in the fragmented and socially displaced processes that are going on. Even in this environment, in fact, Marx's note on displaced processes that are going on. Even in this environment Marx's note on Feuerbach – which asserts that the individual in itself does not exist; that the individual is always the result of his social relations (Marx 1947, 63) – is still valid. It is

essential also because the research should take in account – to avoid reductionism of all kinds – economic and cultural factors (I refer to the culture that is nurtured by experience and by daily life too, the *Lebenswelt* culture), and should explore private and public ground, needs and desires, ideas and emotions and practical behaviours.

These are all territories that have been previously explored, of course, but it seems to me that they have been often explored separately and just to describe them. I think that our research should go through them in new ways, exactly singling out relations and going deep into them to try to find out:

- whether and when the ambiguities open a possibility of choice, in the material and cultural context, keeping in mind that the "culture of choice" implies an everlasting confrontation and practice because the variances – which, of course are fundamental in order to qualify and carry on new choices – are constantly produced and multiply;
- what kind of alternatives and conflicts the choice may produce (not only in order to put up a resistance but also to influence the change). And I refer not only to a possible alternative use of the technologies, but also to a choice among the different technologies as such;
- who is or are the subjects that can make the choice, put the conflict in being and, finally, practice the change they choose.

"Reign of Consumers" Equals Progress?

Now, which is the general context of the actual social change? Which are the new features of the Information Society in the Western developed countries if we look at it from the point of view of the common people?

With the deindustrialisation process, the closure of big factories and the transfer of production in some poorer countries where salaries are much lower, the decentralisation, the outsourcing, the new forms of "autonomous" work, which wipe out the distinctions and the boundaries between working time and free or leisure or private time, capital is subsuming, formally and really (to use the classic Marxian terms), the whole life of workers as a productive force. In the global market the previous separation between work and life no longer exists. In this process capital tends to subsume the brain and also the soul and the affections of the workers and of their relatives, wherever and however they live and work: Everything goes in production and on the market.. "The new fixed capital is constituted by the social and life relations on the whole" (Marazzi 1994, 112).

This is what they call "flexibility," a process that is bringing about wide and profound changes in social life. And here we have a very good demonstration that the technological determinism is an ideological trick. As a matter of fact, it is surely true that this process is undoubtedly made possible by the development of communication technologies and by the huge growth of information flows. But, at the same time, the growing demand and use of information is precisely urged by the destabilisation of the work market and the "obsolescence" of the fixed workplace, by the unceasing need to acquire new information and relationships to find a way of earning one's own life. Those who preach the "free market" and its inherent "flexibility" assert that this is "progress," a path toward the emancipation of the worker. However, when we observe this "progress" within its social context we

cannot help but notice that current conditions are reminiscent of the feudalistic age – as has been noted by various economists and social scholars – thus we could say that this looks like some kind of a…regressive progress.

Furthermore, in Italy we have a new specific social phenomenon. In the last two decades, in the region of Veneto, a multiplicity of small family enterprises have been formed and operate. They operate on the global market pretty well, thanks to the global communication networks, but when we come to social, communitarian relations the family is still the main context. What does this mean as far as the "Information Society" is concerned? And what are the consequences in the whole of the social development process?

Let's consider now the "reign of consumers." Nowadays the companies, it is said, are strictly obliged to find out and meet customers' needs and desires: they do it through the information networks and tend to customise products as much as they can. "Nowadays the customer is in the driver's seat," *Business Week* recently reported in a special issue about the future of technology (SOURCE). The customer may be in the driver's seat, but who's really driving? Who makes the choices to meet the most profitable demands putting aside the others? Who creates the fashions and consequently the social groups within which individuals tend to recognise themselves?

Permanent Duality: Ambiguity Gives Rise to Alternative Perspectives

We know, of course, that unbalances, contradictions, and processes of exclusion have not been overcome, in the global context, through communication technologies. On the contrary, it is enough to refer to the digital divide to highlight one such contradiction. Statistics are not very reliable. However, on the website netratings.com we can learn that "the United States has more computers that the rest of the world combined" (Nielsen//NetRatings 2004). We learn also that in 2001, 41% of the global online population is in the USA and Canada, 27% of the online population lives in Europe, the Middle East and Africa (25% of European homes are online); 20% of the online population log on from Asia Pacific; only 4% of the world's online population are in South America (Nielsen//Netratings 2004). Inside Europe too we have big differences: Sweden ranks as the nation with the highest percentage of home internet connections at 61%; Spain trails the list with only 20% of its homes connected. The latest statistics regarding Italy give 14 million users connected, about the 25% of the population (Dati 2004) but, once again, statistics vary too much and so they are only vaguely indicative, as evem the sources admit.

Contradictions, though, may produce fruitful conflicts and ambiguity may be practiced in different ways: In principle it opens alternative perspectives and the possibility to choose.

Let's look, for instance, into the fast growing social area of the "new autonomous workers" and into the capitalistic trend to subsume and enslave the whole life of this new productive force (Bologna and Fumagalli 1997). Is it really possible for capital to take full possession not only of the professional knowledge and the spirit of enterprise of this new kind of worker, but also of their feelings and, finally, of the whole of their life? Is it possible, instead, that the same process may produce a new way to conceive work and professionalism and a new kind of autonomous

relations – different from those that were generated by the factory life, of course, but still out of capital's hold – exactly on the basis of communication networks? In other words, is the "autonomy" that characterises these new types of work and activities on ambiguous ground? If we look at feminist assertions and at women's new behaviours, if we look at the different movements that have developed, especially in the service and assistance areas, we see some new kind of civil and political practice which deserves to be investigated just from this point of view.

And here comes in also the conception of the work and of its place and meaning in the life of each person. We see that most of the individuals – especially males – work, and accept any condition of work, because they think this must give them the possibility of earning their life, even if, as we have just seen, their life risks being completely exhausted in the practice of work. But there are other workers – women in the first place – who strongly wish to find a work, a working practice which can give them the possibility to realise their personal talents and their desires, and which can give them the chance to exchange knowledge and life emotions with other workers. This too is a difference, partially a contradiction which can result in new conflicts and new choices and deserves to be investigated too. It is significant that there is a new claim to what is called the "basic revenue" or "citizenship revenue" which is actually discussed mainly among young people and would substitute the claim to the "right to work" (Biondi and Casilli 1999).

New contradictions we find also when we take into consideration what they call the "knowledge industry" and the education process. The "know how" and specialisation are the aims that school, universities and the education system in general should pursue, it is said, because this is the only way to become professionals and to find work in the "Information Society." But technological development and the resulting social changes exactly demonstrates that an education so narrowly conceived and organised gives bad results because the "know how" rapidly becomes obsolete and it is necessary to face the change by a richer knowledge which can be acquired only through a basic culture and a general bent for learning (otherwise, what does the oft celebrated "life-learning" mean?). The paradox is that ICTs mihgt be the proper medium for this kind of education, but here the dominant trend is the opposite, instead. It is absolutely true, for instance, that the univer-sity, in particular, should be deeply reformed to confront new social changes, but it should be reformed not, as is currently the trend, toward a more narrow and speciali-sed focus (teaching "know how") but exactly in the opposite direction (Cesareo 1999).

Some questions arise also when we refer to the issue of control. This is another example of ambiguity. We know very well that ICTs allow the political, institutional, economic power to control practically everything in the public and private space (USA imperial politics has been considerably strengthened by the development of the information and communication technologies), but we see also that the new communication technologies enable, for instance, the elderly and disabled to control in new ways their physical and social space and their relations. So, once again, we have two opposite possible uses of the technologies. What are the consequences of this permanent duality?

Another question: Does the fast growth of connections through the communication networks produce homogenisation or does it shed light on diversity and

therefore give way to fruitful exchanges? There have been many discussions about this alternative which springs from a new ambiguous ground where new contradictions emerge.

Through a small research project I have conducted among my students I discovered that most of them consider the "other" as a threat and that's why they are always cautious at the beginning of relationships and in general tend to keep relations superficial. Some prefer to meet the "other" through the Internet, where it is easier to protect oneself and choose whether it is desirable to make friends. But if they build a group, then they tend to make it difficult for new people to enter in. I don't know whether there are researches currently probing this area, but I think that here is another kind of ambiguity which deserves to be investigated.

Lastly, as is well known the Internet is the most obvious territory for contradictions and ambiguities, on many levels. The Internet is the territory in which corporations tend to control and commercialise everything and, at the same time, it is the medium that civil and political movements use to exchange information, organise assemblies and parades, discuss widespread and diverse problems, and, time after time, directly constitute themselves.

Communication Research: The Search for Questions

If this analysis is correct, the last – but absolutely not the least – question that arises is, as I put it in the beginning: Who is or are the subjects that can make the choice, put the conflict in being and, finally, practice the change they choose? It is obvious that communication research must consider this issue, and not as a minor one, if we wish to give the "culture of choice" a real content..

We have seen that the "Information Society" has not wiped out the conflict between capital and labour; on the contrary, since capital tends to subsume the whole life of the worker, may we say that the conflict is exactly between capital and the human person in whole? If the question has this universal meaning, the traditional social category of "class" appears to be too narrow or too general in this new context.

On one side, the old place where the working class was materially and culturally formed – that is the factory – has at least changed, or is turned into a desert as we can sadly ascertain in so many regions of our countries. It is true that in some eastern countries and in some "developing" (how sarcastic this common term sounds!) countries new factories may be opened, but this does not simplify the question; rather we are confronted with another contradiction resulting in more differences to investigate.

In this context, on the other side, even the class culture of the factory workers (who are still millions, just to avoid any misunderstanding) has become weaker, also under the influence of the mass media. In Italy, we have significant experience in this field; there are thousands of factory workers who voted for the Lega (a right wing and racist party) first and, afterwards, in recent years, Berlusconi's party. Here is another reason why it is important to research the actual relations between economic and social structure and culture, and to observe the relations among working people. Nowadays we are very far from the mass industrial workers who had been assumed as protagonists of the class struggle in the sixties and seventies by a part of the extreme Left.

Nobody can deny that the development of communication technologies and of information flows offers many new possibilities for social and human relations, but what kind of relations are we talking about? I agree with what Herbert Shiller has always insisted on and that Frank Webster synthesises writing that "it is capitalistic characteristics which predominate in the origination and current conduct of the information realm: it is the primacy of corporate players, of market principles and inequalities of power which are most telling" (Webster 1995, 72). But this does not mean that fragmentation, spreading individualistic behaviours, variable lifestyles, and the dominance of marketing mentality on one side, and – I insist – the sublimation by capital of the whole life, on the other side, do not produce and, at the same time, reflect new kinds of relations.

It is also essential to consider that ICT did not obliterate the "old" mass media. Television, in particular, is still very active everywhere, and I mean general TV not only satellite channels. So we have to take into account also these media and, unlike many researchers, we have to consider not only the products and eventually the "effects" on audiences, but also the actual structure of the apparatuses, the mode of production and the production relations (we are in political economy, aren't we?). There are many cases today of a different use (or at least of tentative new uses) of the "old" communication technologies; it is enough to mention the militant production of information that took place in Genoa a few years ago or the experiments of street TV which are actually going on in our country. But very few are the researches who try to hold in due consideration the possible incidence that these experiments may have on apparatuses and whether these tentative new uses may produce new production relations and/or may change the relations between information producers and their audience. It is also in this context that we should consider the possible rising of a new subject. A few months ago, we had in Rome a most vigorous debate among young people who try to produce what they call "militant information" or "counter information." They were discussing whether the militant people who produce information should do it as sharers or as observers; whether they should focus on demonstrations and political actions or should care also for people's motivations, differences and daily life; whether the "militant information" should give the addressees the means to understand and judge and eventually choose or should make propaganda and form new militants. To sum up, the core of the debate was, on one side, the relationship between the "militant informer" and the movement and, on the other side, the relationship between the "militant informer" and the events, between the "militant informer" and manifold social processes.

We find ourselves today in front of the magma of these new kinds of relations – in work processes, in information processes, in daily life processes – and we need to look deep into them to understand what these varying connections really bring into women's and men's lives and world conceptions, trying also to suppose which ones can embody the subject or the subjects of possible social conflicts and of possible choices.

I do not maintain that theorists and researchers have not worked on this topic. Many have done it, on philosophical and sociological ground, studying local communities and virtual communes – it is sufficient, I think, to mention the huge bibliography that Castells gathers in his books (Castells 1996, 1997) (where we do not

find, however – and very strange it is! – Herbert Schiller, nor Nicholas Garnham, nor Andrè Gorz, nor many other authors who have published a few pages on these matters). In Italy three intersting authors who have written about these topics are Aldo Bonomi (1996), who uses the term "multitude" to define the magmatic social crowd, and Carlo Formenti (2000) and Eleonora Fiorani (1998).

But it seems to me that this is the territory that deserves to be investigated more and more and in new ways in the present time, exactly from our scientific and political point of view. Because we are confronted with global social and political movements of different kinds, since the first *Global Riot* took place in Seattle, and one of the main questions is, in fact, how does it happen that these movements are so different in composition and culture, and even in political approaches and behaviours, and yet are still trying to find a common "antagonistic" road toward "a new possible world". The "antagonism" of these movements comes out from different sides and from different interests. There are many organizations that bring about a daily practice that testifies to the productive relations among their militants (just think of the equitable commerce, for instance, or of the work of assistance they carry on), but we see, then, that these relations have different personal motivations and are based on different cultures, religious or lay, left-wing or even right-wing, and are unsteady and appear to be renewed time and again.

Should we suppose that the only unifying factor is their longing for some gratification or the "enemy" they fight against? But still they discuss – online and during their meetings – in an attempt to find common specific purposes and strategies. Is it possible then that, as Hakim Bey (1985; 1996) says, an "antagonistic syncretism" is the glue which keeps them together preserving the differences and the different motivations? The idea is fascinating but it raises new questions and doubts.

We are looking for answers, of course, but to find them, I am persuaded, we must avoid myths and seducing images and ideological short cuts; we must doubt and raise and confront questions, again and again and again.

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