

The Time of the Nets

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The twentieth century ended in November 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The 21st century unofficially begun in 1993, with the first diffusion on a vast scale of the Internet. There is no doubt: the coming of the "global web" announces an unprecedented epoch: the Age of Net. The Internet is a net whose circumference is unlimited and whose centre is nowhere. This decentralised, interactive, horizontal medium, that connects its users at the speed of electron, establishes a sort of planetary brain whose neurons are the connected individuals. More than thirty million people have already entered this global communicating society, that easily overcomes frontiers and controls. Each month, one million new "contacts" join this system. On the "info-highways", where writing, sound and image blend in a unique numerical language, a New World is rising, a "cyberworld", populated by "cybercitizens". Neither governments nor politicians have so far understood the exact measure and the consequences of this phenomenon.

Every technological evolution creates its own ideology, and this ideology drives social change. In traditional societies, human relations were mainly territorial and took place in a continuous spatial dimension. Urbanisation has deeply modified this model. To the disjunction between the place of work and the place of residence some social praxis' have been added that daily permit to exit one's own domicile (multilocalization). Space becomes a property like any other, that can be sold, amassed or exchanged. The advent of the net transforms and accelerates this process. While communication becomes the essential engine of social relations, the extension of the net contributes to the fragmentation and the "uninstitutionalization" of society. There is no more belonging, no more adhesion: "to be on-line" is the categorical imperative. Political parties no longer represent an efficient means of achievement for individuals, while civic associations and single issue movements overwhelms trade unions. In the world of the net there are no more nations or populations, but multiple and winded belongings: tribes, Diaspora and clans.

Walkman and mobiles are tools, among many others, that contribute to free man from steadiness. "Tomorrow streets and squares", Alain Finkielkraut says, "will be invaded by busy mutants talking with themselves". Thus a nomadic society is created - nomadism of tools, of values and of men - that privileges a cross-sectional modality of communication, flattening all the classical institutional and pyramidal structures. A virtual world, with no distances and no expiration is growing: a world of uncontrollable crypted net, in which unmaterialised objects circulate and return materialised at the end of the process they're involved in; a world that could also become a financial jungle, where the Stock Exchanges are transformed into electronic casinos.

In addition to nomadism there is cocooning. Internet is a communication tool, but its form of communication abolishes the dimensions of space and time, that are(were) the context in which, until yesterday, human freedom was expressed. In this way, the net imprisons the individual in a private sphere that is more and more limited to the abuse of a remote control or of a keyboard. The progressive sliding of the job place towards the address (telework) goes in this same direction. If world can be virtually discovered remaining at home - philosopher Paul Virilio argues - why should we exit? Finally, the net emphasises all the essential features of this age: the mood for immediacy (i.e. zapping), the oblivion of history and of "the reasons", the enjoyment is conceived as a privileged way of access to the experience. Freedom of expression is more and more restricted in its commercial form, the absolute sovereignty of the consumer. Bill Clinton defined the electronic commerce "Far West of the total economy". In a universe in which everything is accessible through a toll (global marketplace), only the market still distracts people from loneliness.

The advent of the net also creates assemblages of a new type. When 300,000 persons are gathered in Paris for the "Gay Pride" day, when the world-wide Days of Youth inspires one million catholic young people to join in Longchamp, when hundreds of thousand persons take part in Belgium to a "white march", when two million Basques protest in public square against the attacks of ETA, when a million Germans take part in Berlin to a "love parade", when one million Italians demonstrate in Milan against the division of their country, when an innumerable crowd meet in London for the Ascension-day in paradise of Lady-D, former-Madonna of tabloids and instantly proclaimed Saint and martyr once dead, the sociologists refer to "unidentified popular movements". These, more or less spontaneous, huge assemblies truly represent the type of manifestation that corresponds to the world of the net.

Besides the obvious diversities of motivations, they all are a unique phenomenon: post-modern ways of affirmation of a feeling, a belief or a shared way of life, set inside the current tendency of affirmation of communitarian identities, that go beyond the limits of the usual belongings.

So, flows replace territories everywhere.

The Internet is only the most immediately visible form of this deterritorialisation. We are only at the beginning of a phenomenon, and whoever believes that it could be reversible in the short term is probably wrong. The advent of the world of the internet is a challenging question. The state of tomorrow will depend on the way we will be able to give it an answer.

(Translation into English by A.Boraschi)