

Open Dialectics: Trajectories and Discontinuities in the Interconnected / Hyperconnected (Mass) Society

di Piero Dominici

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.

Michel Foucault

So the whole question comes down to this: can the human mind master what the human mind has made?

Paul Valéry

Technologies are nearly living things. Like all evolving entities, they must be tested in action, by action.[. . .] Eventually, by living with what we create, we can redirect technologies to new jobs when we are not happy with their outcomes. We move with them instead of against them.

Kevin Kelly

What are the requirements of the “new” hypercomplexity (cognitive, subjective, organizational, social, ethical, linguistic and communicative) that characterizes the Hypercomplex Society¹? Aside from a systemic transnational perspective on strategies and politics, above all what is urgently called for is the definition and configuration of an interpretive theoretical model (and a new system of thinking) capable of, if not (fully) comprehending, at least recognizing and explaining the trajectories, which are themselves uncertain and confusing, as well as the numerous discontinuities in a global process of change that, in turn, has been casting radical doubts on paradigms, methodologies, analytic instruments and culture (organizational and non). The cognitive technological civilization has at last begun, after much delay, to realize the importance of a thinking style and a politics that can no longer afford to have a close-minded and particularistic outlook, especially in an era where signs of insecurity, uncertainty and vulnerability of every kind are on display, an era

¹ For the concepts of *hypercomplexity* and *hyperconnected society*, also for the definition (approach) of “inhabiting hypercomplexity”, see Dominici 1996-2019. The roots of these ideas can be traced in Wiener, 1948, 1950; Ashby, 1956; Arendt, 1958; Simon, 1959, 1997; Bertalanffy von, 1968; Bateson, 1972; Lakatos – Musgrave, 1970; Foerster von, 1981; Maturana, Varela, 1980, 1985; AA.VV., 1985; Luhmann, 1984,1990; Gleick, 1987; Gallino, 1992; Kauffman, 1993; Gell-Mann, 1994; Prigogine, 1996; Diamond, 1997, 2005; Morin, Ciurana, Motta, 2003; Morin, 1973,1977-2004, 1990, 1999, 2015, 2017; Capra, 1996; Emery, 1969; Barabási, 2002; Israel, 2005; Gandolfi, 2008; Taleb, 2007, 2012; Tegmark, 2017.

where dramatic conflicts are taking place, that fuel the illusion, not only among the political classes and leaders of the nation states, of the prospect of *finding simple and immediate solutions to complex problems*, but also – and above all – that reinforce the rationales of exclusion and of perpetual emergency. All of this without considering, on the other hand, the new asymmetries and inequalities that are paradoxically becoming more and more blatant, right here in the era of maximum *technological expansion* and of extraordinary scientific discoveries.

A hypertechnological era, ever more subject to entropic and chaotic driving forces that, beyond the undeniable accelerations and advances in every field of human and social praxis, should have defined and determined ideal conditions in terms of control and predictability of behavior, processes and systems. A phase of radical global mutation which, as has already been underlined, forces us to *reformulate our thoughts* on categories, codes, languages, instruments, identities, subjectivities, cultural norms and models, (open) communities, relational and communicative areas, environments and ecosystems. Never before has technological innovation, with all the risks/opportunities that it implies, brought the social actors and organizations to the brink of making a further, irreversible *quantum leap* (Dominici, 1998, 2005, 2011, 2019a,b,c).

This step-by-step attainment of evolutionary self-leverage casts radical doubts on traditional models and categories, obliging (?) us to revise the very concept of “Person”, *rethinking humanity* (Dominici, 2017, 2018, 2019a,b,c; Gell-Mann, 1994; Finn, 2017; Bostrom, 2014; Tegmark, 2017; Fry, 2018) and its somehow ambiguous interaction with all that is technical and technological (Robins, Webster, 1999): an interaction that must give rise to a *complex synthesis*, whose prospects, developments and implications cannot yet be evaluated. Caught between utopia and dystopia. Between the forces of interdependence and fragmentation. Between inclusion and exclusion, within asymmetries running along discontinuous trajectories.

We find ourselves *within* the interconnected/hyperconnected society that “is a hypercomplex society” (Dominici, 2005, 2011), in which the management and processing of information and knowledge have by now become our main resources, a kind of society where the exponential growth of opportunities for connection and information transmission – the fundamental factors of economic and social development – do not yet correspond to an analogous increase in the opportunity for communication, which we define as the social process of knowledge-sharing that entails equality and reciprocity (inclusion). Technology, the social networks and, more in general, the digital revolution, despite having determined a paradigm shift in the setting up of the structural conditions, allowing the interdependency (and the efficiency) of systems and organizations, and having intensified the intangible flow between social actors, have not yet been able to guarantee that the interactive networks that have been created will generate genuine communicative relationships, based on, that is, truly shared, symmetrical rapports. In other words, the network

has constructed a *new ecosystem of communication* (1996) but, although it has designated a knowledge zone, it cannot by itself assure horizontality or symmetrical relationships. Again, the difference comes down to who and how: the people and the uses that they make of technology, beyond the potential interests at stake. For the same reasons, we will henceforth be using the term “connection technology” instead of “communication technology.” (Dominici, 1998, 2014)

The Ongoing Anthropological Transformation: New Ethical Issues

Between neo-positivism and techno-enlightenment, we are living in the age of the triumph of technologies, in which the “Subject” appears to have succeeded in dominating nature, controlling the ecosystem and organizing his surroundings according to his own laws and based on their utility. In reality, however, these objectives have not been fully reached and, above all, they have not been clarified, although said subject seems to be aware of having made a quantum leap, a leap that has passed the point of no return. Scientific developments, along with the new connective technologies, have deeply modified economic, social and political conditions, as well as the rapports among the former nation states, at this point overridden by the flows and dynamics of globalization; the protagonists of this great digital revolution (Toffler, 1980; Castells, 2009; Floridi, 2010; Boccia Artieri, 2012; Rainie e Wellman, 2012; De Biase, 2013, 2015; Ippolita, 2014; Graeber, 2015) that has transformed the world economy are the media in general and the Internet in particular, which, having nullified the space-time barrier, and thus the distances that separate us from the rest of the world, have created the structural conditions for the coming of the *new ecosystem of communication based on the rationale of continual connection*.

Never before has the image of the *Global Village* – prophesized by McLuhan (McLuhan-Powers, 1989) – come back so clearly to haunt us, which – albeit in a context dominated by *rationality* and by the logics of control and surveillance (Foucault, 1975; Lyon, 1994, 2001) – seem to feature an entropy that disequilibrates the balance of the so-called “infosphere”² A “global village” increasingly interdependent -- this is by no means the first time we make this point -- that resembles more and more closely a *hypertechnological* and *hyperconnected* – but above all – a *hypersurveilled mass society*. Considering the complexity of such a metamorphosis and the new situations that it implicates, whose solution cannot be met simply through acquired experience, an in-depth analysis of the possible ramifications correlated to the coming of the

²At the onset of the 80s, Alvin Toffler was already speaking about the coming of an “Infosphere”: this concept is highly utilized today but often erroneously attributed to other researchers. Personally, for various reasons, I have always preferred to use the term “new ecosystem” of communication (from 1995 on).

technological network civilization is sorely needed. As discussed elsewhere (1996), we are talking about an *anthropological transformation*, evidently capable of changing our way of understanding reality and the world system, yet whose possible consequences are no less dangerous all the same.

The subject (the new subjectivity) appears to be ready – once again – *to steal fire from the gods*. This potential for action, this capacity to shape reality through reason, science and technology, is perceived by the subject to be nearly unlimited. Nevertheless, the impression it makes is that there is a very low level of awareness regarding the intents behind the choices and the actions. To put it differently, the fundamental problem is that “with certain developments of our powers the nature of human action is changed, and since ethics is concerned with action, it should follow that the changed nature of human action calls for a change in ethics as well; this not merely in the sense that new objects of action have added to the case material on which received rules of conduct are to be applied, but in the most radical sense that the qualitatively novel nature of certain of our actions has opened up a whole new dimension of ethical relevance for which there is no precedent in the standards and canons of traditional ethics.

The novel powers I have in mind are, of course, those of modern technology. My first point, accordingly, is to ask how this technology affects the nature of our acting, in what ways it makes acting under its dominion different from what it has been through the ages.” (Jonas, 1979)

Within the interconnected/hyperconnected society, the network and the digital media guide and accelerate the process of change, where communication and information have by now become “primary needs,” capable of impacting social stratification on a local and global level. On top of that -- as we anticipated quite some time ago -- democratic regimes are basing their lives and praxes more and more often on “rules of engagement” that are defined and *constructed* (other than carried out) not by the legislator, but within the educational and professional institutions, places where information and knowledge are constructed and processed socially (Dominici, 1996, 2005, 2014, 2017).

The so-called electronic highways and the social networks, with their new communicative and *connective environments*, have created an authentic world cybersystem, a site of *expanding and connected intelligence* – in the past, we have spoken about the *new global ecosystem* (Dominici, 1996) – made up of virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993, 2002) which are in constant contact with each other, at least potentially, within a setting dominated by the continuous flow of information and intangible goods. In this regard, Pierre Lévy has hypothesized the coming of a new *collective intelligence* coordinated in real time, and the opening of a new *anthropological space*, the knowledge space (think of the *open source* model), which, in order to shape itself as opportunity, must be open and, above all, built collectively. Thanks to the new media and to social networks, new collective forms of intelligence and *cybersociality*

(Casalegno, 2007) with extraordinary cognitive capacities are destined to develop, produced by the exchange and *sharing of knowledge*, by the fusion of diverse cognitions and creativity found in social systems.³ According to Lévy, with the help of information technology, it will be possible to distribute and potentiate intelligence in every place and moment (Lévy, 1994, 1996; Robins, Webster, 1999; Marinelli, 2004). The scenario that unfolds is both complex and fascinating. Although, of course, the digital revolution also carries a number of risks that must be carefully evaluated: if on the one hand, the digital media and connecting technologies offer the (individual and collective) social actors possibilities for actions and transformation of reality as yet unexplored, on the other hand, fundamentally important issues regarding the organization and the realization of truly open, inclusive societies demand our attention. These are questions that must come to terms with the necessity of guaranteeing, or at least attempting to guarantee, *equality of starting conditions* (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2002, 2010). The new forms of inequality clearly concern culture and knowledge. The analogy used by Luciano Floridi is effectively descriptive: “[The information society is] . . . like a tree with weak roots, further and healthier growth at the top might be impaired by a fragile foundation at the bottom.” (Floridi ²⁰¹⁰). An imagery that well portrays the analytic efforts we have carried forward in essays prior to today’s.

It is precisely for the above-listed reasons that the new technological civilization calls for choices that will turn out to be decisive for the economic-political structures of humanity, insofar as it will be the strategies we adopt that will determine whether we can bridge the abyss which divides the world in two: a rich developed North on the one hand as opposed to a backwards South on the other.

Beyond Dichotomies and Polarizations

The fundamental problem is as follows: how to unite technological progress and civic sense. The philosopher Koslowski clarified this issue a few years ago: “[. . .] the demand for making the industrial society ethical and cultural – and making ethical and cultural its social branches of economy and state – is a response to the discovery that the modern, by its nature, carries risks.” (Koslowski, 1996). We are dealing, therefore, with unavoidable questions linked to the rather widespread and deeply rooted conviction, on the part of both individuals and society, that technological progress can, per se, contemporarily bring us moral and cultural progress.

³ The concepts of connection and collaborative intelligence are of interesting relevance to this theme; we had spoken about shared knowledge (Dominici 2003 and 2005), developed collectively and in an intersubjective manner.

First, however, it is necessary to clearly describe the nature, the effects and the possibilities of the new *media and the new digital ambience*: in doing so, our analysis must take into account the fact that the two opposing categories -- *apocalyptic* and *integrated* -- that were originally theorized as extreme positions (today known as techno-skeptics and techno-zealots), gradually becoming more deeply delineated and diversified, lately have begun to blur (Eco, 1994; Lumley, 1994). Dichotomies and polarizations that should be left behind once and for all.

It has been possible, however, to pick up some *leitmotifs*, some points of convergence: value judgments aside, all theories apparently admit that mankind, more or less consciously, is beginning to formulate a new conception of itself, in the wake of a long process of transformation that has already landed on the far side of an authentic quantum leap -- and this idea, as we will see, is kept well in mind by those who are formulating new proposals in ethical fields. So it would seem, from the literature on the *media* (digital and non), that a synthesis is being sought, however difficult it may be to achieve.

Many authors seem to side with the “apocalyptic”, nearly Luddite position, whereas the optimistic point of view on technology’s ongoing effects, on the part of other authors, is almost at a level of technological fundamentalism. Still others, more impartial, have tried to find a more balanced and mature position at the midpoint between the two extremes, choosing a sort of *third path*. So, what do they have in common with the matter we are discussing? In all likelihood, the common feature could be withheld judgment, and this withholding is, in all probability, an ethical suspension, regarding identity, subjectivity, social rapports, relations of power, asymmetries. On the other hand, within complex modernity, social systems appear to be more and more characterized by the dynamics of conflict and by a *limited rationality* that leaves every debate open and unsolved. In this context, communication, which, as we have described from the beginning as a *social process of sharing knowledge* (1996), places itself in a strategic centrality in every dimension of the praxis.

The *hypertrophization* of bureaucratic apparatuses, the gradual diminishing of public spaces and of democratic evolution – founded on the principles of transparency (Byung-Chul Han, 2012; Dominici, 2005) and access, on the concept of popular sovereignty and, from a cultural perspective, on *economic individualism* (the latter forced upon *democratic individualism*; see Urbinati, 2011) – have reduced the functional area of the public sphere to a mere question of “representation” and to the role of “*handmaiden* to the power system” (Dominici, 2005, 2008, 2011). The evolutionary process in newly born democratic regimes, often culturally founded on the concept of *sovereignty of the people* – meant as *hegemony* or predominance of the *majority* – and on the omission of a clearly defined rapport with the founding principles of liberty and equality, has also brought about a radical *politicization* of this concept, which, branching into political institutions and in new social solicitations in search

of public recognition and of a functional translation into rights and norms, has since been developing as an *autopoietic system*. At this stage, we have lost, as Habermas (1968, 1981) has said, that level of *mediation* between system and lifeworlds based on *communicative action*, which could critically define the social petitions and opinions that are generated within civil society and the *lifeworlds*, bestowing, not only public relevance, but also full legitimacy upon them.

Citizenship and Technologies of the Self

The current social systems, laden with chaos and disorder, are going through a further critical phase of change marked by the coming of the interconnected network economy, which raises new issues regarding *citizenship*, at the moment designated as “*digital citizenship*” by academic authorities, for whom the access to knowledge, information and (nowadays) the Internet is a basic right (the term being used is “*public assets*”).

The starting point of this reflection is the right to Internet access, which we must understand, not only as the right to be technically connected to the network, but as the expression of a diverse manner of existing as a person in the world⁴ [...] this as the outcome of a new manner of distributing social power. The simple reference to a ‘universal service,’ which generally continues to accompany these discussions, hence, is inadequate, because we risk focusing almost exclusively on the technical equipment and its availability to the parties involved. It should be clear by now that the right to access is in fact a synthesis between a series of instruments and a potentially open series of powers that the person is free to use online. (Rodotà, 2014)

There are, therefore, new opportunities of emancipation offered by the technologies of connection, and overall, by the *expanding knowledge* that feeds the *protective and promotional social networks*: the bonds of interdependence and interconnection are intensified, although some observers continue to hypothesize the *demise of social ties*. Well worth noting is the interesting growth of social movements and pressure groups that, feeling ever more distant and without representation from politics, have taken on the responsibility of making *grassroots* concerns and issues *visible to the sultan* as well as to *public opinion*.

The previous industrial model made up of consolidated structures, hierarchies and the *logics of control* and *resistance to change* is on the brink of being unhinged by the *new ecosystem of knowledge* which has (at last) begun to be recognized as a *public asset* and as a resource capable of (re) establishing less asymmetric social rapports. But it must be emphasized that the *new forms of social knowledge production* can only be decisive if the actors

⁴ This takes us back to the concept of *anthropological transformation*.

in the public *arena* know *what to do* with the knowledge, with the networks, with the civic and social media, and in general, with technology: and this once more underlines the urgency for a total *reform* of (*complex*) thinking and knowledge, all the more so at a stage where technology itself seems to take on the features of a *living organism* (Kelly, 2010; Lovink, 2016; Byung Chul Han, 2013) in constant evolution (as always, I would like to refer back to the concept of *autopoiesis*), along trajectories that are only partially predictable. A long transitional phase that is characterized, other than by new conflicts and asymmetries, by extraordinary technological innovations that seem in many ways to be structured almost as though they were modern “technologies of the Self,” within constructive processes of the Self and of US, processes where distinction, identification and belonging function simultaneously; processes which, it must be clarified, duplicate dynamics that were pre-existent before the digital revolution, radicalizing them into new forms.

It should be mentioned, as is widely known, that the concept of “technologies of the self” was defined and developed by Michel Foucault. We have taken up this concept again in several of our works, both of early and of more recent date, linking it to functions that certain technologies and instruments – the social media itself (although content and usage count less and less) – perform within the so-called interconnected society. In this ‘society’, among many positive dynamics, the radicalization of certain social tendencies and mechanisms can be noted: for example, the search for continuous *visibility*, for a continual presence “onstage” (ancient metaphor), to emerge from a (real or perceived) isolated or anonymous condition, the urgent need to belong to a group or to an exclusive social network (age-old issues, yet extraordinarily apropos) in the digital/network era. These are social and relational dimensions that must be seen in the general framework of the ever-expanding image culture and the culture of narcissism, which in some cases can bring about processes of emulation (apparently) capable of actually improving (the perception of) the well-being of the Person(s) and, in general, their existence and life experiences. Speaking of Michel Foucault and of the importance and present-day relevance of his written work, he identifies four types of technology, “each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectifying of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, *which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.*” (Foucault, 1988)

The era we are living in, on the other hand, is visibly becoming more and more characterized by the shattering of the systems of belonging and belief -- where

individual and collective identities are actually produced – and by the resulting advancement of individualism and utilitarian principles. It is no coincidence that the “tyranny of the individual” (Todorov, 1995; Cassano, 2004; Dominici, 2014, 2015; Magatti, 2009; Magatti, Giaccardi, 2014) an authentic *centrifugal force* capable of corroding the bonds of the social systems, is currently under debate in many parts of the world. An ongoing and weakening process which is further confirmed by the widespread *deficit of social and political participation* that, in turn, is fueled by the general atmosphere of mistrust towards all institutions (formal and informal), the only bodies that were in charge of transmitting and orientating the moral and cognitive value systems in the past. An extremely complex scenario, difficult to interpret, that in the wake of the loss of political and authoritative credibility, has opened to the hypothesis of democracy “beyond” political parties, insofar as these have proven to be less capable of gathering consent and of mediating the new forms of conflict than in the past. In the background, a crisis of the party-system (Revelli, 2013) which amplifies the other, much bigger crisis, regarding representation.

Narcissism and the Collapse of Trust

The dominating individualism (Weber, 1905; Laurent, 1994) in our social systems is the (somehow inevitable) result of the *emancipation* process/project which has accompanied the advancement of modernity. This process of transformation, which first touched the masses, then the “Subject”, has, on the one hand, augmented reality and has bought into the (at least theoretical) recognition of certain fundamental rights; on the other hand, it has contributed in weakening the bonds and limitations of belonging to a *community*. The triumph of the subject, “*free from . . .*,” but also “*free to. . .*,” (Dominici, 1995-96, 2008-2018) in an era where opportunities for emancipation and extraordinary communicative potential (?) apparently abound (although, in our opinion, communication is too often confused with connection) has paradoxically determined an unraveling of the social tissue, made up of people who are facing this complexity in conditions of greater autonomy but also greater isolation: “There appears to be a structural ambivalence in the birth of the modern “Self” —between sovereignty and insufficiency, between desire for self-realization and sense of uprootedness, between conquest and loss.

The decline of our theological/metaphysical foundations brings on that “loss of order” which seeds the genesis of the modern age, according to Hans Blumenberg, hurling the individual into double disorder: the external disorder of a disenchanted, secularized world, no longer held up by cosmic ties and hierarchical rules, and the internal disorder of his own emotional life, which takes on unprecedented breadth and legitimacy, but which simultaneously unveils itself in all of its disturbing candor. The individual finds himself free

and authorized to create his own life program and to explore a boundless landscape of reality, on which he can cast his curious and expectant gaze; yet, at the same time, feeling a sense of bewilderment and awareness of his own weaknesses in the face of a crisis encompassing every single proverbial certainty, which not only imposes new burdens upon him, but which also exposes him to the unsettling chaos of new desires, inclinations, passions.” (Pulcini, 2011; Magatti, 2018). The contemporary age is one in which the social mechanisms of *trust* and cooperation – foundations, as it were, along with the economy of power relations — have been under great duress from processes of increasing insecurity that have rendered instability an existential condition. The underlying hypothesis, in conclusion, is the following: beyond the grave economic crisis – whose roots are not solely economic, quite the contrary! – the phase we are living through is particularly dramatic because the people and the social actors clearly feel the risk of *the end of social ties* (Touraine); what counts is this (individual and collective) perception, which is also profoundly conditioned by media *narratives* and by the web, of feeling more isolated in facing the uncertainties and the instabilities of life, which have become existential conditions.

I might add that this drama of solitude – which is also a vacuum of significance: it is difficult to give meaning to what is real – can also be found in the obsessive need to communicate (or to be permanently connected?) and to be “visible” at any cost in the new communicative environment and, in particular, on the social networks – so as not to be forgotten (questions of identity and of recognition) or to fall into oblivion (although there is also the debate on the “*right to be forgotten*” on the web) – inside the social pathways and experiences which otherwise would simply be anonymous. These are absolutely analogous, in dynamics and processes, to those of mass society (thus by no means are they over!), bringing to mind, among the most cogent articles in scientific literature on “mass society,” famous studies on *crowd psychology*—where the *logics of visibility*, irrationality (or at any rate, limited rationality) and the processes of *emulation* and/or ostentation are more and more widespread, invasive and dominant.

In some ways, to confirm that this is a paradoxical and contradictory era, we cannot help picking up signals and indicators of an authentic *age of narcissism* (Lasch, 1979; Cesareo, 2012) that no longer involves single individuals but reveals itself to be a collective phenomenon, moving towards the triumph of auto-referential, fragmented identities, between *deluded omnipotence and real impotence*. In this complex, uncertain, and multi-branching scenario, what communication, means of communication (mass and new media, at this point no distinction can be made between the two anymore), information systems, the network, and in particular the Web 2.0 seem to have definitively *occupied* – if not dominated – is not only *public opinion and its spaces for discussion* and learning, but also that essential area of social praxis once “controlled”

by traditional agents of socialization. To this end, it is of fundamental importance that these two different planes we are discussing and analyzing be kept well apart: on the one hand, technology and/or means and instruments of communication, on which we are almost obsessively focused, thus getting sidetracked from more vital issues; on the other, communication itself, which is *a social process* featuring ethical subjectivity and actors/individuals contending with one another on the terrain of more or less symmetrical power relations.

The strongest premise for our analysis is the sincere belief that solely the emergence of a communication culture, in the social systems in general and, in particular, within and without complex organizations (where the concept of organization is an “open system”), can effectively create the conditions for the realization and the concrete application of those rights/duties of *citizenship* without which the *social actor* (in his multiple role of *citizen/user/consumer*) obviously cannot receive any kind of legitimization/ acknowledgement of his demands. Finding himself, in fact, in a condition of subjugation within a public sphere of reduced dimensions that has become completely insubstantial (Dominici, 2017). Knowledge and skills, in this sense, will most likely be the determining elements, in larger and larger measure, of the *power relationships* within every sphere of social, organizational, systemic life, with evident fallout on citizenship and on democratic regimes.

As we have oft, in the past, opined: the complex architecture(s) (2005) that support the network society confirm and reinforce, brushing aside all perplexities, the quality of “public asset” associated with the “knowledge” resource: the only strategic resource derived from processes of inter-subjective acquisition, capable of feeding, from the bottom up, the nervous cells and tissues that replenish the interconnected economy, creating in this manner the basic conditions for the realization and the *evolution of that cognitive ecosystem* (Dominici 2003) based on open, dynamic and more democratic processes than in the past; notwithstanding the many critical points on which we have many times expressed our opinion, proposing the definition of “weak link” (Dominici 1998, 2002) – between the power system and the media ecosystem – to indicate a public sphere which is no longer independent of politics and above all, not trained in critical thinking. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to note the multiplicity of projects whose “molten core” is knowledge sharing, along with a new economic model based on cooperation, on a participative and reciprocating culture, and even on the ethics of giving (in the long term, it goes without saying): an ambitious but by no means utopian idea/project of constructing a global *open source* net, aiming, other than at knowledge production/processing, also at information monitoring (once again, the thorny debates and decisions on net neutrality are crucial here). In a particularly intricate historical moment, in this respect, with profound repercussions on privacy and on the ownership of personal data (left at the disposal of “*digital cannibals*”; see Vergine, 2015), often without weighing the consequences, even in situations of enhanced

reality), as well as on identity and on those rights which are being questioned more and more frequently.

An ecosystem of knowledge (1996) with a grid-like structure that is destined to significantly facilitate the reduction of complexity in a transitional phase towards hypermodernity, increasingly distinguished by growing indetermination and disorder within the systems. We will not encumber the already troublesome dimensions of this article with the appropriate analysis that would be needed of the historical context in which we find ourselves moving; that is, the so-called knowledge society: an increasingly global and interconnected context in which the vast majority of the experiences we live through and relate to turn out to have been (always and in any case) *mediated* by the information systems, by the networks, and overall by the “means of communication”. The effects of these dynamics are by and large cognitive and are defined by those hierarchical themes which are considered priorities by public opinion (democracy). In other words, we are forced to acknowledge the absolutely strategic relevance that communication – by which we mean the social process of knowledge and power sharing, capable therefore of rendering equality to the positions of the actors who are participating in the communicative act – and the communication systems have taken on, regarding not only the processes of socialization regarding individuals, who are making increasingly autonomous choices, including those involving mechanisms of the structuring and definition of identity and of belonging.

This creative evolution (title of an important work by Henri Bergson), evidently linked to technological innovation and to the coming of the so-called network society, has brought about a sort of widening of the praxis, and more specifically, of the public sphere, contributing to restore the central position of the ethical question -- concerning the (not only technical) knowledge and skills which are indispensable in order to guarantee true digital inclusion -- albeit in the midst of a more complex set of problematics. It is not by chance that it is the concepts of risk, (linked to knowledge, trust and liberty – nowadays, digital liberty is often said to be at risk), of uncertainty and of vulnerability which have come to distinguish the dynamics of the modern social systems, intersected by constantly expanding migratory flows, and to denote the new capitalist knowledge economy (*Knowledge Economy*). The process of globalization radicalizes the conflicts, introducing new forms and modalities for the possession of and access to (intangible) resources – precisely because it touches the sphere of shared principles, meanings and symbols, forcing us to confront *the Other* (fundamental); this is also a knowledge issue.

The risk, as we have repeatedly pointed out, is that of confusing “communication” with “connection:” the *interconnected society* augments the possibility of “connection” exponentially, but for the majority of the social actors, the opportunity to access, share and above all succeed in processing knowledge and information is a long way from becoming concrete. Likewise,

a knowledge society founded on sharing and on the openness of systems is still far off (as documented by many research papers and reports), owing in part to the online escalation of a trend that has always been common to interest groups, communities and social systems (in fact, what we have been speaking of is an interconnected and *hyperconnected* “mass” society); that is, “gatekeeping,” which has the dual function of enhancing internal cohesion and contemporarily controlling the dynamics and mechanisms of knowledge and power (Dominici, 1995-96, 2005). We find ourselves, evidently, coming back once again to one of our earlier hypotheses regarding the complex and, at the same time, ambivalent rapport between *liberty and digital* --- we are facing a *dialectic relation* that is conflictual, to say the least, and whose outcomes can by no means be taken for granted.

Following this line of thinking, Ethan Zuckerman of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology comes back in his latest work to these fundamentally important themes, speaking of cosmopolitanism and of the tendency to self-segregation. We are back to the question of the demise of social ties and the “society of individuals”, and of the central role played by the so-called “bridge figure” (blogger), who is capable of translating and sharing information by connecting contexts. One of the aspects of social research that is making its comeback is the figure of the “opinion leader”, as in the *two-step flow of communication hypothesis* (Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944), who was already the subject of significant achievements in communication research beginning in the second half of the last century, although at the time the focus was mainly on mass media. Knowledge potential is increasing, as is, however, “uninformed information.” The digital network and the “new” digital velocities are profoundly changing the structures and hierarchies of the industrial society, positing as an *extension of the system of relationships* (Dominici 1995-96, 2005), an unlimited public space open to *collective intelligence* (Lévy, 1992, 1994, 1997, 2002), and to cooperation and collaborative intelligence. Yet – and I will continue to repeat this ad nauseam – without long-term political strategies centered around schools, education and instruction, the so-called knowledge society will be an even more profoundly asymmetrical and unequal world system. And even speaking out in favor of “meritocracy” will be pure rhetoric in a society with widespread amoral familism and without vertical social mobility – aggravated by the fact that, for some time now, many schools and universities have not been fulfilling their essential missions of “social elevators” -- which continues to cater to elites and small groups; it will be the meritocracy of the usual “chosen few”, of those who have had a head start and more opportunities from the beginning. *Education and Instruction = Citizenship and Knowledge (complexity) = Power.*

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