

## Class composition, web technology and post-democracy

### Internet is not a cure for democracy

The perspective on the theoretical debate between web and democracy changes depends on how the Internet is considered: either as a means of communication—a new “channel”, alongside traditional channels, for interaction between political subjects—or as an “environment”, a sphere of social relationships integrated with economic, political and cultural relationships to the point that they become one body. The key question in the former hypothesis is whether, and to what degree, the web contributes to the extension and to the strengthening of democracy. If on the other hand the latter viewpoint is favored, the question then becomes: which political form tends to accept a society strengthened by web technologies? This paper unequivocally espouses the second point of view, and begins with the presupposition that the crisis of democracy is an irreversible event. The crisis, obviously, does not have anything to do with a democratic ideology (which the US-American superpower tried to forcefully export to the whole world, beginning in 1989) but with the historically determined political form that was born out of, and was developed together with, the modern nation state. Representative democracy, understood as a system of principles, values and rules, which emerged from (1) the order of the European states successive to the religious wars, (2) the great bourgeoisie revolutions, (3) the industrial revolution and (4) the co-optation of the working class into the managing of the state, sanctioned by the social welfare pact, has exhausted its own function over the last fifty years to the point of reducing itself to a media simulacrum.

The causes of its decline are known: globalization of production and investment; governmental dependence on the financial global markets and the subsequent loss of control over the levers of economic policy; the undermining of the social contract between capital and work; the exponential growth of migratory movements and the formation of a huge mass of human beings without any rights, since they are deprived of the status of citizens; the progressive fragmentation of a society that recuperates unity only through the images of the media that become the true place of politics, engaging the processes of spectacle-making and personalization. It is with respect to this last point that any communication mediated by a computer is invoked, from many sides, as a remedy for the “degenerative processes” of politics, as an instrument of restoring legitimacy and representation to the democratic institutions through robust injections of direct democracy.

As stated above, I shall start with a different hypothesis: web technologies are pre-existing causes of the transformation processes that are hardly evoked and become one with the “fragmented society” that emerges from the ruins of the previous world. Therefore, the new political relations they help to produce are not interpreted as a “cure” for democracy, but as drafts for a post-democratic political system.

### Classes without representation

The current scenario can be described as a paradoxical relationship between an emerging social fabric devoid of representation and political institutions devoid of references. This description is flawed, as it assumes that in a hypothetical post-democratic system the theme of representation retains all of its importance. At the same time, it is a useful starting point when beginning to formulate the initial question: is the fragmented society a society from which all the “universalistic” vocational classes have disap-

peared (I am referring to the persistence of incarnating general interests and values agreed upon by the bourgeoisie and the industrial proletariat and by their political expressions), or is it a society in which the new dominating classes are nevertheless not able to instate their cultural or political hegemony?

The concept of “informationalism” elaborated on by Manuel Castells<sup>1</sup> seems to validate the first hypothesis. Castells’ theory encompasses the classic post-industrial themes (the transition from the production of goods to the production of services; an increase in the managerial occupations; a decline of industrial work; a growth of information content in the workplace) but shifts the center of attention to 1) knowledge as the determinant productive factor, 2) the web-like structure that societies and companies are emulating. Informational capitalism implies an increasingly closer link between culture and productive forces, while its organizational unity, rather than being based on new class relationships, is based on the technological infrastructure of the web, or on the bipolar relationship between the individual and the web (that which Castells calls “networked individualism”). It is a model in which individualization of work and social fragmentation proceed in parallel fashion, in which individual and group identities are increasingly more specific and difficult to share. Above all, they don the attributes of constructed identities, as society loses the capacity to offer pre-constructed models.

This type of “designed identity” is reserved for the workers of the upper strata. They are asked to be able to self-program their work and must be given the necessary margins of freedom in order to develop their own creativity. It is precisely in the economic role and in the cultural characteristics of this social class that, unlike Castells, Richard Florida<sup>2</sup> recognizes the connotations of a new dominating social class. If technological and economic creativity are increasingly fuelled by artistic and cultural creativity, if the capitalism of knowledge is obligated to enlarge its sphere of action in order to capture the talent of the individuals who in the previous production method occupied many marginal roles, then we find ourselves faced with a new dominant character (the “creative class”) which founds its power on knowledge, exactly as the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie founded their power on their control of land and industrial production respectively. Economic power has passed into the hands of a class that neither possesses nor controls its own materials, but establishes its own hegemony on the intangible patrimony contained in its mind.

In this model, the conflict between capital and work has reduced the tensions between creativity and organization: on the one hand the creative process requires a form of organization, on the other hand, organizational models—which reflect the hierarchies of their own industrial production—suffocate creativity. In Florida’s argument, the role of intellectual property as an instrument for extending the old capitalistic logic to the new productive factors remains in the shadows, while it occupies a central role in the theories of the third author I shall mention, McKenzie Wark.<sup>3</sup>

Wark talks about the “hacker class”, extending the meaning of the term to the point of figuring its factual identity with the notion of a creative class elaborated on by Florida. There is an important difference: Florida believes that the managers at the helm of Internet companies are fully part of the creative class (as inventors of ideas which can be sold to venture capital and which can be converted into industrial trademarks). Wark, on the other hand, believes that they belong with their colleagues in the cultural industry: communications and software, with that “vectoral capital” that can exist only by extending its juridical regulating of private property and the whole sphere of immaterial production. Extending the area of intellectual property with the help of the state, vectoral capital subjects immaterial goods to the principle of scarcity, which governs the capitalistic market on the one hand,

and on the other hand “creates” a hacker class in so far as the creative class expropriates its own means of production. It is a model that proposes a post-modern version of the Marxist antagonism between capital and labor.

Despite the differences, the three theoretical arguments just presented converge on one point: they hypothesize a dissolution of the social class in the magma of individuals online (Castells) that announce the birth of one (the creative class according to Florida) or two (Wark’s vectoral and hacker classes) emerging classes. None of the authors cited feels that the new social composition has generated new forms of public representation. In Castells, faced with a proliferation of individual identities, the demand for principles and universal values is missing. Florida talks about the paradox of a class that does not see itself as such, and that differs from the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It does not unite to promote new political and social structures. Due to its own individualism and the fragmentation into professional niches, the creative class takes refuge in every form of political organization of its own interests, cultivating the illusion that, in any case, the world will continue to provide the environment it needs.

The theme of individualism and of fragmentation into professional strata appears in Wark, who defines the hacker class as a class that produces itself by itself, but not for itself, insofar as it identifies its own interests with those of other classes (in particular with those of vectoral capital) and competes with its peers, who it sees as rivals in the race towards the acquisition of prestige. However, a difference should be noted: Florida sees the development of a class consciousness on the part of the “creatives” as a presupposition for the birth of new forms of democratic representation, while Wark maintains that the difficulty in identifying a shared interest results from the fact that the hacker class is characterized by a “common interest in the qualitative differentiation”. Wark writes that the hacker class “does not need unity in identity, but it looks for multiplicity in the difference.” In light of this, the theoretical discussion moves from the fight for development to new forms of representation, to overcoming the concept of representation.

Wark believes that the hacker class becomes the protagonist in the politics of the “non-performable”, of “atopic” politics, because of the measure in which it takes on a political conscience, in the sense that it refutes that space of representation which is the public space of modern democracy. Another question arises at this point: Can “alternative” socialization practices and political participation which have been diffused through the web in the past years be considered as an embryonic model for the post-democratic system?

#### From the neo-anarchical myth to the hybridization of political forms

The political culture of the Internet has long been fueled by the neo-anarchical myth synthesized by John Perry Barlow’s “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”.<sup>4</sup> This myth has constructed the image of the web as a territory “freed” from the political interference of governments; an alternative space, inhabited by a cosmopolitan population of “citizens” emancipated from geographical, ethnic, ideological etc. boundaries and unresponsive to hierarchical relationships. There must be absolute horizontality between two free and equal individuals, absolute freedom of expression and association in relation to affinities, no elites, no need for political representation.

This myth endured until the effects of integration between the sphere of communication mediated by the computer and other spheres of social relations (with the economic and political system in the forefront) were manifested in a very evident manner: 1) through the commercial colonization of the web by Internet companies, 2) through the adoption of fiercely repres-

sive laws governing intellectual property, 3) through the proliferation of control technologies after September 11, 2001. Fortunately, the end of this myth has not only generated depression and disenchantment, but has also created the conditions for a more lucid reflection on the forms of political organization and participation that have developed through the communication practices mediated by the computer and on their hybridization with the forms of “classic” democracy, as well as on the emergence of embryonic post-democratic institutions.

I believe that the debate on these arguments must commence with these three facts in mind:

1. Open publishing technologies and various types of online forums have allowed the new social movements to experiment with highly efficient ways of organization and mobilization, functioning at the same time as powerful channels of counter-information to the point where they have been able on many occasions to condition the agenda of mainstream media.
2. The phenomenon of swift and spontaneous mobilization by “word of mouth” on the part of the users of wireless technology (the “Smart Mobs” analyzed by Howard Rheingold<sup>5</sup>) has shown that in the presence of events capable of provoking strong and diffuse emotive reactions, great crowds of people that do not know each other are capable of following a common goal (although it should be underlined that similar neo-mediatic events do not seem capable of establishing either organizational structures or forms of collective memory).
3. Having overcome the myth of absolute egalitarianism, so begins the deliberation on the web as a selection mechanism of the new cultural and political elite. Analyzing the phenomenon of blogging, Derrick de Kerckhove<sup>6</sup> has highlighted the example of the role of the “reputation capital” mechanisms as selectors of opinion leaders in the blogosphere area, which in this way comes to function as a sort of “neodoxa”. These types of mechanism have had a determinant role on various important political occasions: from international mobilization against the war in Iraq to the last American presidential campaign. Other analogous examples of informal and highly unstable elites (in as much as they are continuously precarious because of the mechanism of online “rating”) come from the stories of the developers of open source communities, where cooperation on projects and meritocratic competition (the fight for the acquisition of reputation capital) go hand in hand.

Analyzing these mechanisms of social and political online aggregation, Geert Lovink seems to exclude the possibility of their “contamination” with the classical forms of democracy. Lovink<sup>7</sup> admits that it is true that online forums can be compared to the drawing rooms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeoisie who represented the cornerstone of democratic culture, but it is also true that they are not democratic structures able to make decisions. Even more radical is the second objection: while classical democracy is a form of legal power that is exercised against the confines of the nation-state, the Internet is a global sphere of social relations made up of implicit rules, informal networks, collective knowledge and rituals that are continuously incorporated into the software. Therefore, according to Lovink, the new rules are to be inscribed into the laws and into the legal procedures of a “reformed” democracy, as well as into the software: democracy founded on the web is constructed, developing new types of lists, blogs and interfaces.

I believe that three criticisms can be brought forth to counter this position. Firstly, the idea of comparing the democracy of the computer code to the democracy of the juridical code seems to re-propose a project of improbable “secession” to the technological avant-garde.

Then, with regard to the counter-opposition between the “cosmopolitanism” of the Internet and the national radicalization of classical democracy, it must never be forgotten that real modern democracies are relatively far from adhering to the procedures and legal inscriptions in the constitutions of the single nation states (one need only think of the restrictions that the trans-national institutions impose on economic and military decisions).

Lastly, the influence of online “drawing rooms” should not be underestimated. It is true that they are not structures that are able to make formal decisions, but nor are they traditional media. This has not impeded them from becoming the principle forum of political debate and decision-making, while the institutions of classical democracy have entered into a state of crisis. It was the old media that initially started the discussion on the difference between private space and public space, but it was new media who completed the process, generating a space that appears to be public and private at the same time. It is the unstable and turbulent space of neodoxa; ungovernable by any prearranged political design, which today menaces the precarious equilibrium of representative democracy. And it is this space that cannot give up the goal of contaminating/hybridizing the forms of traditional democracy if it wants to survive. While the emerging elite uses the mechanisms of transparency and the interactivity typical of the new media, the old tries to appropriate such mechanisms to render them asymmetrical: the transparency of the subject versus the opacity of the sovereign, domesticated interactivity in the procedures of e-government without e-democracy. From this—after the neo-anarchical myth—comes the urgency to overcome even the dreams of “secession”.

If it is true that the real democracies in which we live are “mutated” democracies (in which the political space is transmigrated from the parties to the media, and in which the rules and principles of national democracy must compare themselves with the imposed limitations from decisional spheres of a trans-national nature), if it is true that web technologies are an integral part of this mutation, then we must realize the urgency with which we must define a constitutional space for the information age. Stefano Rodotà,<sup>8</sup> former president of the Italian authority for privacy, insisted on the necessity 1) of elevating the right to access to the rank of a fundamental right, 2) of constitutionalizing the principle that certain information must be made public, 3) of making the legal principles and the technical procedures for the tutelage of private information more rigorous and efficient, and 4) of activating channels of interaction between governors and citizens that allow the transition to a “continuous democracy” in which citizens are not only called upon to express themselves through referenda, but who can continually make their point of view heard through forms of “democratic lobbying”

#### Towards an institutionalized neo-medievalism

In the preceding paragraph I claimed that a reflection on the possible conditions of hybridization between political culture and procedures of representational democracy was urgent. The question of the outcomes of this hybridization remains open: reformed democracy or post-democracy? I return to what I affirmed in the first few lines of this paper: in a historically determined form, the democracy of the nation state has irreversibly declined. It is no longer the individual nation-states that can decide between war and peace; this privilege rests solely with the world’s only superpower, while the principle of non-interference in internal affairs has been annulled by the system of international relations. Governmental direction of political economy is no longer subjected to the judgement of the citizens-voters, but to that of the super-national organisms, deprived of any democratic legitimization, (FMI, WTO, World Bank, the top executives of the European Community, etc);

governments appear impotent in the face of the decisions made by the global financial players and by the trans-national companies. The “open space” in which the democratic debate is developed and is a prelude to political decisions no longer corresponds to the institutional sphere (parties, parliament and administration) but to the sphere of the media.

The development of new media has strongly contributed to making the crisis worse by: 1) accelerating the process of productive and financial globalization, 2) giving life to a neodoxa that, on the one hand has “cosmopolized” the cultural and political debate, and on the other hand has pushed the axis of the institutional sphere even further towards the sphere of the media, and 3) developing forms of organization and political participation that are much more unstable and dynamic than those of traditional democracy.

However, if web culture cannot (nor does it want to) “reanimate” the democratic class, it can (on a local level) contaminate principles and procedures activating new channels of interaction between governors and citizens and can (on a global level) construct a network of mobilization and counter-information for the development of democratic lobbyism with regard to the trans-national power centers. Describing the effects of these transformations on the institutionalized European equilibriums, Manuel Castells<sup>9</sup> talks about a “network state” and of “an institutionalized neo-medievalism”. In fact, at the apex of the Community we find institutions like the Council and the Commission, that, while they have the power to make decisions that touch the daily lives of European citizens, do not have any democratic legitimation. It is not the (quasi impotent) parliament that balances this “monarchical” power, but the galaxy of administrations that are called upon to voice (sometimes in competition with and sometimes with the support of new movements and informal organizations of democratic lobbyism) the needs of grass-roots participation.

In this way, a mechanism of incessant negotiations is created, between a plurality of overlapping powers and powers that are in reciprocal competition. The authority (whether it is legitimized or not by forms of democratic participation) does not appear concentrated at one point, but is distributed along the nodes of the web, so that not even the most powerful nodes can ignore the others in the decision-making process. We are talking about a model that is analogous to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s<sup>10</sup> “mixed constitution”, which was elaborated on in relation to the world system, born out of the end of the cold war: imperial power (United States), aristocratic power (nation-states, multinational companies, G8, FMI, WTO, World Bank, etc.) civil international society (new movements, NGOs, regional powers, etc.), but also the political scene of late medieval Europe empire, church, commercial leagues, professional corporations, free cities). The way in which the scene is played out; favoring either the imperial or the new post-democratic ending, is what is at stake in the next decades of political struggle.

Translated from Italian by Maria Anna Calamia

1 Castells, Manuel, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford 1996–2000

2 Florida, Richard, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Philadelphia 2002

3 Wark, McKenzie, *A Hacker Manifesto*, President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2004.

4 <http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>

5 Rheingold, Howard, *Smart Mobs*, Boston 2002

6 Speech at Congress “Riconoscere/Riconoscersi”, Università degli Studi di Lecce, Corso di laurea in Scienze della Comunicazione, Lecce, April 5–7, 2005.

7 Lovink, Geert, *My first Recession*, v2\_Nai Publishers 2003

8 Rodotà, Stefano, *Tecnopolitica*, Bari 2004

9 Castells, Manuel, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford 1996–2000.

10 Negri, Antonio; Hardt, Michael, *Empire*, President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2000