

Human and non-human aggregates. Political technologies

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Transition of dualisms Natural/artificial - human/non.human

The dualistic opposition between nature and the artificial has characterized our culture since antiquity. Defining the borders of these categories, however, is a growingly and ever less practicable task in relation to contemporary artificial devices.

It is of course possible to predicate teleology of the artificial device: it embodies its perspectives of use, while the natural derives its meaning from past history, by which it was determined according to the actual general conditions of compatibility.

Moreover, ascribing a given entity to the natural rather than the artificial order can actually turn into a process of legitimization or, on the contrary, into its questioning, in relation to the different values that can be attached to each of these orders of things.

This very process was at the roots of the proclaimed neutrality of scientific research, on the basis of a purely epistemological connotation of its functioning, with the artificial dimension being transferred to the domain of technology and of its uses.

This schematic division of labour, however, is no longer allowed by the connotations of post-academic science, or by the most recent developments of philosophy and the sciences.

In fairness to history, it must be remembered that the quest for continuity between these two worlds has interested scientists, philosophers and art historians for a long time. It barely needs recalling that, at the dawn of the age of the great landlords-collectors, in the XVI Cent., the holdings in the *Kunstkammern* were classified according to the scheme: natural forms-ancient forms (fossils)-artwork-machine.

Such a concept of continuity finds today its highest expression in the statement that "The Nature of man is the artificial (Emmanuel Mounier, 1905-1950). What, in fact, distinguishes our species from the others, except the skill of crafting instruments in order to mould nature? Didn't Bacon state that the nature of things comes to sight more as a consequence of the art than for the sake of its own freedom?"

Mounier throws a disquieting light on a theme that is typical of contemporary culture and life. Disquieting, because it anticipates both the themes of the uneasiness of humanity *vis à vis* its own creations, and of the control of Technique and the necessity of being free from, rather than subjected to it. The text, however, does not appear pessimistic, in that it vindicates a wisdom-generating capacity of autonomy and freedom even against the most novel experiences. Here the author, a catholic, reconciles Christianity and science, and the thematisation of this non-conflictuality sounds striking to those who, instead, are faced today with drastic and restrictive reciprocal condemnations.

Mounier wrote in 1949: "the crisis in belief is but a consequence of the sudden and almost contemporaneous collapse of the two major religions of modern world: Christianity and rationalism". He probably couldn't foresee that this very crisis would remain at the centre of a heated debate some 60 years after. Post-modernity faces us with troublesome quests for a "creed" (think of the New-Age wave) and with scientific claims to omnipotence.

Post modernity is characterised by the passage from an industrial revolution, to which we were able to give a sense and in which we could find a way, although within contrasting schemes of interpretation, to a revolution that, in its incessant transformations, seems not to precipitate a present allowing any kind of reflection and habituation. The future suddenly turns into past, hence a feeling of loss leading to the very anguish and uneasiness referred to by Mounier. The being-thrown-into-the-World (to use a meaningful image coined by Ricoeur) implies the impossibility of sighting any landing shore: lost in the complexity of contemporaneity, the individual relies on a weak thought whose main prerequisite is the renounce to the strong assumptions of the past. Secularisation has transferred a number of theological concepts on a secular ground, the individual re-appropriating its own destiny within an immanence that does not help it to find a measure to itself and, therefore, determines the deconstruction and the implosion of the subject itself (Antonio Villani, *Le "chiavi" del post moderno: un dialogo a distanza*. Ed. istituto Suor Orsola Benincasa, 1988).

The time of progress comes to be demystified in its strongest and most inevitable meanings, and is turned (according to Vattimo) into *happening*. Traditions do not speak to us any more, although their reinterpretation can at times be instrumental to the construction of novel representations of reality. Only science keeps solid ties to the real, which are however most difficult to understand, given its extreme specialisation and the continuous acceleration of knowledge production. This is not by chance, as is highlighted by our ongoing commerce with the virtual and the immaterial, even in the form of consumption goods. Such a context imposes the necessity of a great mobility of relation and a deep transformation of the consciences: the responsibility for the choices is relegated to the single individuals, with the consequence of a generalised de-synchronisation hindering any prevision about the future.

Arnold Gehlen in fact, highlights the impossibility of ethics to actually confront the Technique for, when the former comes into play, the latter has already far exceeded its limits. That humanity, which hoped to be freed from its sufferings by Technique, comes nowadays to be its prisoner, *and morality is relegated to the desperate role of continuously raising obstacles in the way of the efficient, the feasible, and the functional*.

Technique is unable to satisfy the "fundamental need" for reassurance of the human being.

We are forced into a continuous state of vigilance, to persist in a kind of chronic alarm to verify, at the level of both actual control and ethics, the surrounding world and our very actions or, better, to improvise time after time fundamental decisions. And all of this in an environment made out of mobile and ever changing close-ups, backgrounds, characters and keywords. Such conditions do not allow any more for the required minimum of balanced conformity that is needed by every human society, thus the divergence among practical, technical, moral and rational opinions grows to such an extent as to hinder mutual understanding.

Gunter Anders sheds some more light on what happened to our age, by exploring that social, cultural and anthropological leap, on whose trajectory we are still precariously poised.

Anders wrote in the 1970s (although the book was only published in the following decade) of an (already accomplished) industrial revolution, of an (ongoing) revolution

of consume and, finally, of an (upcoming) second industrial revolution about to displace *homo sapiens* and to finally consign it to history. The new technologies, just making their appearance on the stage of history, were about to deprive man of its role as a social and moral entity, while at the same time limiting its autonomy and freedom of choice.

The centres of power, in fact, would have used these same technologies to impose a deeper and more pervasive control on the masses.

Now, back to science: we have said that it does no longer provide certain truths, but most of all it is clear that a wider knowledge does not equal a firmer control over reality. Technology has widened the spaces, beyond the borders of the world itself, and reduced time to the real one. Framed within these new dimensions, the individual can't but float on the surface (Baumann's "surfacing"): the future is fragmented and full of uncertainties, the complexity of problems conjuring to make any prevision problematic. One last consideration appears inevitable: the progress of knowledge has not prevented a regress to barbarism, on the contrary!

Human/machine aggregates

Technology doesn't only provide new instruments, it also legitimates new patterns of behaviour, institutional arrangements, cultural processes that, inasmuch as they are "neutral" products of reason, escape any judgement of legitimacy. The objectivity of technical knowledge has acquired such a high status of truth as to obliterate other forms of human experience: the contemporary trend is to objectify even the humanistic knowledges, sterilizing those aspects that do not allow quantification or that point to the impalpable features of sensations, emotions, and passions.

We have to admit that the assumption of technological knowledge as truth and paradigm of post-modern culture is daring, but has proven successful: suffice it to think how even the Church appeals to scientific data to defend theological values.

In the absence of utopias, technical visions of the future render impossible and dissolve any social knowledge. Experience, from which social knowledge derives, is no more a given, a capital from which to draw, but a path to walk.

Technology also produces a sort of dis-embodiment of experience, which is forced into mathematical abstractions, neutralising the emotions and reasons that should be part and parcel of it. W. Benjamin had foretold that in the modern age experience would have been doomed to atrophy, in that it would have trusted to the technological intermediation of the machines and of their specific organisational patterns. Our society would have become an abstract society, due to the expulsion of the contingent human and of the corporeal.

It is not by chance that we also happen to lack an adequate language: there exist real conceptual blanks in the representation of reality, which make it impossible to communicate and, hence, to build a social knowledge. The virtual goods, on which the market largely relies, still want a language to adequately represent them. In 1970, J. Baudrillard had already warned that the exchange of signs instead of objects would have radically modified the market, and invalidated Marxian theories on capital, Heller's theories on the needs etc.: the principle of simulation would have taken the place of the principle of reality. Contemporary art finds in this context a new form: it does not respond to the canon of beauty any more, rather it represents and interprets reality. The aesthetic dimension is abandoned in the name of an immediate, and sometimes exaggerated, semantic aspect, aiming to disclose to us the naked essence of what surrounds us. Through the media we witness violent deaths (both civil and of war) and gratuitously inflicted daily sufferings, as an abstract show taking pace on the

stage of our minds and assuming virtual forms, because deprived of any sound, smell, real perception.

The body does not participate to reality. The senses are overruled by an environment perceived as alien. As a consequence, emotions and feelings are soothed. The mind does not elaborate any real impulse and thought of con-division with the victims. No thoughts are produced that may lead to real and concrete aiding initiatives, for we do not see, hear, touch, feel the smells, sounds, forms of real pain.

The virtual is depriving us of our being here and now. On the other hand, the term "virtual" points to something that is still not there.

In some sense, the body is an alien (external) object to us, rather than the vehicle of our participation to life, to its smells, its physicality and that of others.

Nevertheless, research itself has shown us that identity is essentially built through the relation established by our progeny with the world since the earliest moments of life, a life made out of environment, of course, and of people with whom to interact. It is not by chance that birth is referred to as "coming to the world". The senses begin to work, the brain to register and react within that complex pattern of interactions that makes it enormously difficult to tell what is coming from the self and what from the world. The person is progressively defined and, with it, the sense of good and evil, of joy and pain, of beauty and ugliness. If, however, our body is not questioned through the senses any more, even those other entities, which we call ethics, aesthetics, etc., will lose any meaning to us.

Thanks to technique, however, the body is endowed with the possibility of amplifying the senses, nullifying time and space, paving us the way to the infinitely small as well as to the infinitely big. This represents beyond doubt an amplification of our experience, but it could also be a sign of transition to a different human nature.

There is nothing trivial in posing this question, since we are actually confronted with the immaterial and the virtual, even in the form of consumption goods. Such a context implies a great relational mobility and a deep transformation of conscience: the responsibility of single choices is handed over to the individual subjects, with the consequence of a generalised de-synchronisation of experience, making any forecast on the future of a possible collectivity impracticable.

One other intermediation is missing, with the effect of ultimately displacing the body. It is the intermediation of the confrontation between the self and the other, the "you", in which the body is as patent and active as the mind. As Adriana Cavarero put it: "the *you* comes before the *us*, or the *they*. Symptomatically, in the modern and contemporary ongoings of ethics and politics, *you* is a displacing term... *Us* is always positive, *You* (plural) is a possible ally, *them* represents the antagonist, *I* is improper and *you*, as said, superfluous".

Nowadays, subjects are always plural: it is always easier to be us or You, a sum of bodies with the minimum common denominator of physical strength (of oppression, I would add) and of the unique thought, and the minimum common denominator of triviality.

Political implications

What remains, then, of the life of the individual in this society? It becomes customary to recall Aristotle and his concept of *phronesis*, intended as coming to terms with reality or, in a more aesthetic version, as *art de vivre*.

At the level of the individual, the importance of a quick decision is predominant over the relation between the self and the chosen action, so that the subject is confronted with responsibility as a non separable dimension of action. Hence, moral conflicts find a collocation within the moral self. This very self is not aided, as we have said, by

experience, nor it is by social or cultural resources to define moral choices. Modernity has, in fact, also marked the distance of social life from the domain of duty. (Lipovetsky: le crepuscule du devoir).

Justice in modern society is despoiled of any utopian illusion; it comes to us as a process, rather than as an achievable condition. Ethical practices, in fact, can be generated by daily contact with real living people, and this is the only way to contrast the de-corporealization of experience produced by technology.

We are now hitting the ground of *biopolitics*, a term coined by Foucault, and which should be more adequately considered by the various political actors.

Democratic and reformist parties are still too strongly tied to a concept of science as a source of truth and certainty, and tend to oppose rationality to faith.

We have already shown how this is no more the case, but we wish to add that relying on science as the basis of a lay culture can lead to dangerous oversimplifications. Shared values spring from shared experiences, both historical and daily, of collective and individual life. With its elements of acquired knowledge, scientific rationality can provide important criteria for telling good from evil, right from wrong, but it cannot provide all possible answers.

History, emotions, knowledges and different experiences conjure in defining the moral judgement. It is to these sources that we need to refer in order to devise a possible ethics for our age. Some values, part and parcel of Western history, must be recast in the new forms required by technological society.

It barely needs to remark how the respect for the human body (*habeas corpus*), of the person, of personal and private life of civil coexistence (with all its implications in terms of equality, solidarity, freedom) are challenged daily.

Limits need to be imposed wherever all these principles may be violated. It is not difficult to understand where the violation may take place, if we think of the invasiveness of biomedical practices towards personal and private choices, or to our subordination to electronic systems, which completely exceed our control.

A second point of weakness lies in the general assumption that *science=progress* (with its contemporary version *technology=innovation*).

For one thing, the two statements are not equivalent: the first still bears a noble hint to the growth of knowledge, even though it is now clear that progress is not necessarily given.

What is lacking is a shared definition of progress: the idea is more and more widespread, that it is not to be evaluated in bare economical and or material terms. The second statement, instead, explicitly refers to this, assuming innovation as a function of the production of new goods or definition of new processes.

Innovation is the new must, independently from socio-cultural contexts, from real possibilities of shared access, or of real improvement of the conditions of life and relations. Innovation, as a concept, lives a separate and self-sufficient life: nobody questions the starting point or the goal, the goodness and fairness of the choices, whether we are ready or not to cope with the inevitable positive or negative fallouts. Once again, we are confronted with a dangerous concept of the consciences as a *tabula rasa*: do we really believe our body capable of bearing the weight of total and sudden innovation?

Here the question is raised of the subordination to technique, which comes to our sight in the many facets of consumer society. It was technique itself to create the novelty of virtual reality that has, in many cases, deprived the real of any sense and translated meanings, despoiling them of their innermost essence. This aspect is well evident in the consumption of reality shows, which comes to include the bodies and lives of common people, deprived of their privacy. But other, more sophisticated forms of hetero-directed and uncontrollable consume are made object of attention by

scholars and analysts of post modern society and explain many of the aspects of the frailty and vainness of the individuals.

The primary object of 3rd millennium exploitation is the consumer, deprived of its decision making capacity by a technique that anticipates and conditions choices, that creates immaterial environments in which the individual believes to take place freely, in fact risking to be captured by non immediately identifiable subjects and entities, which can direct it at their will. The fear of the unknown, which compels us (as is already happening) to look for scapegoats in the usual victims, and, in parallel, the aggressiveness that characterizes many behaviours, find their very origin in those choices/non-choices which we happen to make at every point in our existence, without the tools necessary to really understand what we are doing. Democracy is forced to start over again from the recognition of these dangers and from the acquired consciousness that real choices are still an option to the individual that refuses to become a passive user of what is offered to him. The subjects in the democratic process are finally those who, like once the industrial workers, insist in remarking their will to re- appropriate their own bodies and lives, in order to consciously manage them. Fear can be overcome with the building of social ties, by re-defining the concept of individual autonomy, by highlighting the fact that it only finds a meaning within the relation to the other.

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