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# The meaning of localism in a global world

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First of all let me thank professor Kristóf Nyíri for inviting me to speak to this distinguished meeting in this magnificent venue, although I am not a specialist in communication research, and even less in mobile phone research. In fact, I am not even a mobile phone user. This may be of some interest to you, since as a member of a disappearing tribe I may lend myself as an informant, witness, member of control group or guinea pig for your next inquiries. In the final part of this paper I will try to explain the reasons of my mobile-dodging and some sociological reflections, from an outsider’s point of view, on the mobile communication. In the first and second part I shall stick to the assigned theme.

## 1. Globalism and globalization

### 1.1. *Old stuff?*

The reason I am here is that professor Nyíri happened to read a paper on globalism and localism I published some time ago (Strassoldo 1992), and to like it. My basic argument was and is quite simple, I think: 1) globalism and globalization are rather old stuff; 2) in the last few decades, technology has significantly accelerated and intensified old trends; 3) in a more globalized world, also localism shows new traits; 4) in particular, localities have become dialectically linked with globalities, giving rise to the new concept of glocality. Let me, in this first section, dwell a while on the first two points..

Globalism is the idea that men all over the earth live, or should live, in the same encompassing social (moral, religious, cultural, political, economic) system. Most ancient empires were driven by this simple idea. Of course there were also all sorts of less noble motivations for their efforts to expand territories and subdue peoples; but the idea of universal empire is basically a moral idea: there is only one right and good way of life – one way to be really human and civilized – and all peoples should be brought to benefit from it. So it is the imperial power’s *duty* to rule the earth. The Romans harboured this principle, and Rudyard Kipling wrote at length, in prose and poetry, on the (English) white man’s burden.

Catholicism is another literal synonym of globalism (greek *kathà-holikè* = concerning the whole world). Not all religions are expansive, universalistic and oecumenical (another synonym:

oekumene is the entire inhabited world). Many of them are thought of as a privilege to be restricted to special groups. Christianity has early become catholic especially through the efforts of St. Paul, who overcame other apostles' reserves on the issue. He stressed that the Gospel of Christ was addressed to all human beings, and had to be spread all over the world. In the following centuries, the drive to convert the heathen often took harsh, and even cruel forms; but there is no doubt that it was meant to their benefit; at least, of their eternal souls.

In pre-modern times, it is almost impossible to keep religion apart from politics; thus, the doctrine of the global, universal empire was usually both an ideology and a theology. As there is only one true God in the heavens, so there should be only one supreme authority on the earth; the emperor is a god himself, or his representative. This is the idea that underlies most ancient empires, and ruled even in Europe in the late middle ages. Roman-Christian-German emperors, from Charlemagne on, were depicted holding in their hand the globe topped with the cross. This globalistic tradition of the Empire held on in neighbouring Austria well into the XVIII century, but with increasing embarrassment. So it circulated in public mostly as a rather mysterious and ambiguous acronym: AIEOU=*Austriae Est Imperare Orbi Universo* = "it is the duty of Austria to rule over the whole world".

The idea of globalism remained quite distant from reality in all ancient empires. In fact, all of them remained regional, local powers. They had several techniques to reconcile the universalistic claims with the confined realities; one was to avoid interaction and mutual recognition between them (isolationism), the other was to define other people as utterly savages and even non-human, thus unworthy of any concern. Of course, the existence of some empires was in fact unknown to others, as in the case between the Old and the New worlds.

Globalization, as a fact, started in a precise point of time, and in a particular place. It began in the middle of the XV century in Portugal, when seafarers learned how to sail the oceans. Since then, European/Christian/western/modern society has not ceased to spread over the whole world. It charted the globe on world atlases, caging it in an orderly grid of meridians and parallels. It christened its parts, stretching enormously the names given by the Greeks to the coasts facing their Aegean sea (Europe, Asia, Africa), while the Americas got their name from the Florentine gentleman Amerigo Vespucci (incidentally, the brother of the young lady Botticelli portrayed as Venus cruising the seas on a shell). Europe linked the continents in a world-wide web of sea routes and ports, along which ever increasing flows of people, goods, ideas and information circulated. In time, she subdued most peoples of the earth, by the force of its inner drives, organizational skills and technological superiority. European sails and guns (Cipolla 1966) allowed Atlantic-European powers to build colonial empires overseas, while Russia conquered most of Asia, down to the Pacific and beyond. Where the environment was suitable and the territory sparsely inhabited by locals, European immigrants built New Europes, as in the Americas, in Southern Africa, in Australia; filling them with animals, plants and bacteria brought from home (Crosby 1986). Other countries and peoples underwent a process of europeanization, with different degrees of success. European colonial powers transferred populations between continents; the case of Africans shipped to the Americas is only the most gigantic and infamous of many others. European languages – Spanish, Portuguese, English, French – became the official languages in large expanses of the planet, and so did the European religions. It may be reminded here that one of the original reasons of the Portuguese drive to circumnavigate Africa was to build alliances with the legendary "lost Christians" in Africa and Asia (particularly in Ethiopia and in the Indies), and so to attack Islam backwise. At any rate it is undeniable that since Columbus the mission to extend the Christian faith all over the world was one real motivation of colonialism, albeit of course not the only nor the main one. More recently, another European quasi-religious doctrine spread to important parts of the world (notably China), namely Marxism-Leninism.

Of course, it can be maintained that the most important motivation of imperialism was greed: the quest for valuable goods, starting with gold and silk and spices but soon encompassing the whole of economic valuables. The economy became soon global. Emmanuel Wallerstein has

written extensively on the rise of this world system since the XVI century, and on the differences between the capitalist “world economy” and the universal political empire model (Wallerstein 1974).

In view of all this, by the XVIII century it was generally believed that the European civilization was headed to become the only world civilization; that all peoples of the earth should be raised to her civilized standards. Some radical jacobines (e.g. Anacharsis Koot) thought that it was the mission of the French to free the whole of humanity from the chains of “tyranny and superstition”, as the phrase went; and that, in return, Paris was entitled to become the capital city of the whole mankind. Hegel spoke of Weltgeist, the World Spirit, and Goethe saw it riding on horseback, in Napoleon’s boots. Fifty years later, Marx and Engels wrote ( in the 1848 *Manifesto*) that it was the historical mission of the European bourgeoisie to spread modern industrial capitalism to the whole world, in order to prepare the revolutionary onset of the World Proletariat and universal socialism.

But perhaps, more than of doctrines, globalization is the fruit of technology. After the days of sailing ships, a new spurt occurred around 1835, date to which the “mobiletic revolution” was born, according to some scholars (Russett, 1967) . In those years, the steam engine was routinely installed in boats (steamships), and on wheels (the train), and the telegraph was invented. In a matter of a few decades, most of the world was linked by a network of railroads and a web of wires and cables; often in parallel. Another quantum leap in globalization came around the year 1900, when the motor car, the radio, and the airplane were invented. A new series of webs – motorways, airlines, and electromagnetic communication – were added to earlier one (Hawley, 1971)

All this was hailed as a boon to humanity – pure progress – but, as it soon turned out, it had its dark side. The world had become so small and interdependent, and the technologies so powerful, that local conflicts escalated to catastrophic global wars: the first time almost unwittingly, the second by conscious strategy. In the wake of it, it was deemed necessary to build world political organizations: the Society of Nations after the World War I, and the United Nations Organization after World War II. The eternal aspirations to a unitary World Government were revived.

### 1.2. *Why should we be so excited about globalization?*

If we pay attention to fundamentals, then, globalization is rather old stuff. So why all the excitement about this buzzword in more recent times? I may venture out three “cultural” and one more “structural” explanation.

First, I am tempted to impute it, at least in part, to sheer historical ignorance. The prevalent worldview passed down from national school systems to the half-educated masses is that humankind is neatly divided into national societies (the several, distinct “peoples”), as they are represented on political maps (the “planimetric fallacy”, as Konau,1977, put it). People may be appalled or surprised or elated to discover later, mostly from the media, that there is an enormous amount of phenomena that are global in scope – circulation of resources, commerce, corporations, entertainment, epidemics, environmental hazards, terrorism. They would incline to think that all this is new; unaware that most of those phenomena have been around for centuries, while what is really new (relatively), and inadequate, is precisely the nation-state-centered view of the world.

Lack of historical perspective and awareness also characterizes, I am afraid, the discipline of sociology. The idea of society has generally been modelled after that of the nation-state, and most sociologists study aspects and problems of their own national societies; or at best, do comparative studies among national societies. The study of “ international relations” has been mostly left to political scientists. A truly global perspective in sociology is rare; and the stimuli in this directions, contributed both by the founding fathers and by more contemporary masters of the discipline, have not found much resonance (Strassoldo 1979). Who remembers nowadays the tracts on “global society” and “worldsociety” published several decades ago by Robert Angell, (1951) Wilbert Moore (1966) , John Burton (1972) and a few others? I am particularly fond of Niklas Luhmann’s

flat statement, thirty years ago, that “there is today in the world only one society, and that is world society” (Luhmann 1975).

Another explanatory factor may be the demise of the socialist systems and of Marxist-Leninist theory. Marxism, as mentioned before, had a strong “global” orientation (like most sociological grand theories of the XIX century), and the more recent discussions on globalization bear much resemblance to what was earlier discussed under the heading “imperialism”. The social-political movements rallying under the “no global” slogan are the direct heirs of those who thirty years earlier would take to the streets against “imperialism” and “dependence”. Why those names have fallen in such complete disregard, except in very small circles, I am not sure. It may be simply an example of the need of novelty also in the realm of ideological lexicon, and hence a “political marketing” pitch; or the fact that that otherwise respectable term has been appropriated by world-terrorists.

### 1.3. *Has globalization recently made an evolutionary leap?*

The more structural explanation has to do with the quantitative growth of global phenomena. I assume that everyone agrees that the flow of people (for business, tourism, education, refuge, work etc), goods (merchandises and services), “bads” ( crime, pollution, pests, terrorism, etc) , and information across national borders have been increasing phenomenally in the last decades. Three questions now arise. The first is: Do the lines representing the growth of global flows (and the relative global stocks) show relevant course changes (accelerations, jumps and flexes, thresholds, etc.) in this period?

Alternatively, the second question is: Is the quantitative increase and intensification in globalization trends of such magnitude, as to allow for the application of the old engelsian “dialectical law”, according to which under certain circumstances, quantitative changes result in qualitative ones? In other words, have globalising forces proceeded far enough as to bring about fundamental changes in our society ? Or still in other words, has the centuries-old evolution of global society come to a revolutionary explosion, a quantum leap, a change of state? Are we living in a global or globalised society, radically different from the one of three decades or three centuries ago? I do not know. The problem here is twofold. On one hand, we should agree on which empirical data to select as indicators, and how to weigh and give meaning to them. On the other hand, we should decide a priori what behaviour of the data constitutes a qualitative change of state, a revolutionary change, a catastrophe in the literal, Thomaeian meaning of the world. And this, I am afraid, would entail endless discussions.

The third question is the one more closely related to the aims of the present conference. What is the contribution of the “new technologies” to the growth of globalization? Hard to say, also because we are in the middle, or only at the beginning, of a veritable explosion in this field. As Hegel put it, the owl of Minerva only takes flight at the end of the day, meaning that the powers of rational analysis can only be exerted when a phenomenon has run full course. But I am afraid we’ll have to wait a long time before the impact of the new technologies on society and culture result in some stable, recognizable patterns. Before that, we can only gather provisional data, draw scenarios and venture prophecies. My personal impression is that the fundamental impacts on society and culture have occurred with the spread of the landline telephone (and telefax), broadcasting media (radio and television) and the PC. All newer developments – cable and satellite TV, internet, mobile telephony and all their mutually-reinforcing combinations – have phenomenally increased the speed, power, diversity and flexibility of the earlier technologies, but not altered the basic pattern. Perhaps more important is the fact that they have become accessible to the wide masses, thanks to the vertical fall of their costs.

This sceptical stance comes from my background as an urban sociologist, interested in the impact of communication technologies on settlement structure. It is clear to us that the shape of cities has been deeply affected - revolutionized - by the spread of mechanical transport, of telephone

and of television (as well as by other, simpler technologies, like pipes, conduits, ducts). We do not see yet in urban patterns radical changes that can be attributed to the newer technologies. On the contrary, some forecasts of early prophets of the digital revolution – the disappearance of the big office buildings, and the spread of the “electronic cottages” (Toffler 1970) have distinctly failed to materialize. After two or three decades from those forecasts, “telework” is still confined to a very small percentage of office workers, and virtual “tele-meetings” are still a minuscule part of business life. There is currently a great excitement, in some educational institutions, on the virtues of “e-learning” and the possible obsolescence of universities as brick-and mortar structures, but I remain sceptical. As for the localization and organization of industrial productive unit, the new technologies have only reinforced trends that were well underway with the older ones. So, it is basically a matter of “more of the same” than of revolutionary changes.

#### 1.4. *What is really new in contemporary globalism?*

I would like to close this part of the paper pointing out two real novelties in contemporary globalism. The first pertains its *motives*; the second its *modes*.

Older globalism was fuelled, as we have seen, both by moral (religious) and material (political and economic) motives. It was pursued to spread religions, save souls, or bring people up to civilized way of life; but also, perhaps more often in fact, to aggrandize and secure powers, seize resources, exploit people. In the last few decades, a quite new motivation has set in: to save the Earth from mankind’s wrongdoings. The novelty in this view is that neither God nor man are placed at the center of concerns, but Mother Nature. The “one world” attitude has been strongly reinforced by the awareness that the Earth is the only possible home of man, and that the life on the planet constitutes a seamless web, a unitary ecosystem, a single living meta-organism ( the “Gaia Hypothesis”). As most environmental problems are rooted in the competition and conflicts among the nation-states (and especially among national economies), it seems imperative to strengthen the supra-national institutions. The “care and maintenance of the Spaceship Earth” requires coordination at the global level. Environmentalism has become a remarkable force towards globalization (Strassoldo 1979, 1992). ( In fact, I was quite appalled, when I learned that the global environmental movement was gathering in Seattle under the “No Global” warcry. I couldn’t believe they were so ignorant of history and unaware of their own nature. So I was happy to learn that, more recently, they have changed their sobriquet from “no global” to “new global”, which is much more reasonable).

The second novelty is that whereas former globalism assumed that the whole of mankind would be brought under one civilization, i.e. one set of core values and of common general rules, and under one paramount authority, the new globalism assumes that it is possible to reconcile unity and diversity; that some sort of political and moral unity of mankind can be achieved, while the differences in religions, customs, languages, ways of life and so on are respected. The balance between assimilation and identity, between integration and autonomy, between equality under the law and cultural differences, is a problem all empires and also some proselytizing religions, such as Christianity and Islam, had to face in the past. In our own days, it is politically correct to assume that we have to live in a multicultural world, where a plurality of civilizations co-exist without clashing; where European, Western values and mores cannot claim superiority on any other, and every civilization must tolerate, respect or even admire the others. This sounds all too good, but raises many problems. Personally I think that diversity and multi-culturality are certainly laudable when they pertain to relatively superficial matters, such as cuisine, music, dress, architectural styles, languages, artistic expressions, and so on. But regarding deeper, vital, more structural matters - the reproduction of life, the relationships between gender and age groups, the upbringing of children, the freedom of thought and expression, the procedures of collective decisions, the basic principles of political organization, the respect for life and individual dignity, the integrity of the body, and so on - it is not easy to accept a diversity of principles. The Western civilization has tried to spread its

own core values to the rest of the world, under the form of “universal human rights” proclaimed by the United Nations; but the extent to which it has succeeded is debatable. Non-western civilizations show some resistance, and even growing testiness. Some of the major tensions and conflicts of the present world revolve around such issues. What the final outcome will be is uncertain; but I tend to believe that progress toward global society is only acceptable to the extent that fundamental human rights – to core values of the Western tradition – are globally accepted (Strassoldo 1996).

## 2. A few remarks on localism

On localism I shall be short because I feel that on this issue there is now a wide theoretical agreement among social scientists. It is clear that the relationship of man and society with space – the social organization of space, or the spatial organization of society – are fundamentally affected by communication (transport and information) technologies. Since the “mobiletic” and the “communicational” revolutions, territorial constraints have been overcome, spacetime has shrunk by orders of magnitude, and the ties of man to space and place have become much more arbitrary and negotiable than before. A paradigm is by now well established, according to which the phenomena that can be classified under the concept of “localism” have generally been affected in many ways by the intensification of globalising trends. Localism and globalism are dialectically linked. The theory of “glocalism” is now the standard in the field.

As a former social ecologist I have myself worked extensively on these issues. In 1980 I had almost readied a typescript of about 500 pages on the very ambitious subject of “space and society”. Then the PC was named “person of the year” by *Time* magazine, and everybody got excited on the social effects of the digital revolution, the spread of satellite and optical-fiber networks, Internet and so on. So I decided to delay the publication in order to assess the impact of all this on the spatial organization of society, on spatial behaviour, spatial awareness, and so on. Of course the job quickly proved to be unmanageable, because of the extremely dynamic nature of the phenomena. While waiting for the impossible - the stabilization of the ICT revolution - the typescript obsolesced beyond salvation. In the meantime many other urban-sociologists-turned-ITC sociologists, such as Manuel Castells, published their important books on the subject. So I limited myself to publishing some short excerpts and summaries ( e.g. Strassoldo 1987, 1990), and let the tome in the drawer. Then I found that many other prominent scholars were working in this field, and excellent books were appearing. Some of their author, such as Joshua Meyrowitz and Mark Poster, are present at this conference, and have already delivered their masterly papers. I agree wholeheartedly with what they have said, and have nothing to add or object, nor do I want to be repetitious. What I shall do is simply to read a passage of the paper of mine which I referred to in the opening remarks, in order to show how close my own earlier thinking was to what has been already said here; for instance by Meyrowitz on the similitude between new localism and romantic-love marriage:

“Post-modernism is also marked by a revival of localism. Localism represents one of the possible ways out of the anomy, alienation and identity loss, typical of modernity. The new localism is the search of refuge from the unsettling confusion of the larger world. Modern man/woman has created a global system, which has many advantages and values but which is certainly too complex to survey and manage, even though only intellectually. Post-modern man/woman, just because he/she is so deeply embedded in global information flows, may feel the need to revive small enclaves of familiarity, intimacy, security, intelligibility, organic-sensuous interaction, in which to mirror him/herself, contrary to the process occurring in front of the subjectivity-effacing TV screen .

The possibility of being exposed, through modern communication technology, to the whole infinity of places, persons, things, ideas, makes it all the more necessary to have, as a compensation, a center in which to cultivate one’s self. The easy access to the whole world, with just a little time

and money, gives new meaning to the need of a subjective center,- a home, a community, a locale - from which to move and to which to return and rest.

Traditionally, localism and rootedness have been considered backward, if not reactionary, attitudes, since history seemed to unfold towards cosmopolitanism, universalism, and mobility. Territorial *Gemeinschaft* seemed bound to be destroyed by functional *Gesellschaft*. This has happened to some extent, but the trend could not run full course. It has found inner limits in some basic human needs, and has generated dialectically its own limiting contradictions and countervailing forces.

Of course, as the qualifiers make clear, new localism is different from old localism. The essential differences are two. The first is that while old localism was primordial, unthinking, the new one is the outcome of free will conscious choice; the former is “necessary and natural”, the second voluntary and intentional (rational).

The second difference is that the old localism tended to minimize contacts with the exterior, to maintain a strong closed boundary; while the new localism is quite aware of the rest of the world, and is quite open to interactions with it.” (Strassoldo 1992: 46-47).

### 3. Some thoughts on the mobile phone

#### 3.1 A claim of sympathy

As I informed you at the outset, I do not own a mobile phone. Why? First of all, let me make it clear that this has nothing to do with the health hazard worries accompanying this new technology since its beginning, and that were the special subject of the Udine conference a couple of days ago. I tend to think that all technologies have some unhealthy side-effects, but that their benefits are usually much greater. The health hazards of the mobile phone seem so far negligible, in comparison with its benefits. Moreover, I tend to have an optimistic view of human nature and of society, and to trust legitimate authorities. If the Minister of Health in my country states that, after massive testing, no evidence against mobile phone has emerged, I assume he is probably right.

(Of course, there are many examples in which authorities were wrong. The most spectacular is probably tobacco. When the habit was brought over to Europe, in the late XVI century, physicians and moralists predicted dire consequences. The Catholic Church, in particular, tried a crusade against the vice. But the opposition failed, and King Tobacco reigned for half a millennium, with the huge geoeconomic, social and medical consequences we now know).

Second, I have nothing against technological innovation. In fact, I am a great fan of technologies, and an enthusiastic visitor of science and technology museums. I get moved contemplating the tools, engines and apparatuses which were the result of so much human ingenuity, imagination and often sacrifice, and which, in turn, had such enormous effect on human life – generally, making it less miserable, brutish and short. In particular I am a great admirer of electronic and digital technologies for many reasons; one being that they not only use very little matter and energy, but in many ways can help in saving them in other sectors of social metabolism, and thus are particularly environmentally-friendly.

Third, I am not against competitive capitalism and the market economy, and I must say I am very fascinated by its inexhaustible, fantastic capacity to create new products and the corresponding new needs. This has been going on since the beginning of mankind. To the question of “who needed the mobile, before 1990?” the answer of course is “who needed to cook the meat, before the invention of fire?” It is clear the ability to talk to anyone over the world through a few grams of matter in anyone’s pocket is more than a great progress; it is something miraculous, previously imagined only in myths and fables.

Fourth, I am quite happy that everybody else has a mobile, so *I* can find *them* anytime anywhere.

### *3.2 Two reasons for not owning, so far, a mobile*

So, why do I not own a mobile ? One reason could be – tongue in cheek - that, having noticed that mobiles are getting smaller, smarter, prettier and cheaper all the time, I am rationally postponing the purchase until the *ultimately* small, smart, pretty and cheap mobile comes to the market. This should assure me a long immunity.

A more serious reason is that I am engaged in a social experiment, or a social game. I want to see how long can a person lead a normal life, in a normal occupational sector, in a normally developed part of the world, without a mobile. So far everything seems OK; I have not noticed any drawbacks of my condition, although people trying to get into contact with me may have. In the ten or so years since the mobile has invaded society, I can pinpoint only one situation in which I really would have appreciated having a handy. Even it that occasion, however, the lack thereof allowed me to enjoy a few minutes of a warm human experience.

This personal moratorium, alas, is closing in. I will have to surrender to the mobile, because it is getting harder and harder, at least in Italy, to find working public telephones. Quite clearly, the telephone companies are phasing them out; as it is only rational, since almost everybody, in that country, now has his/her own mobile. I know a certain number of die-hards of my kin, refusing the mobile for a variety of reasons. We could form an association and lend ourselves as an experimental control group for your studies.

On my part, there is no fundamental opposition against the mobile. As an outsider to the realm I have been making more or less casual “natural observation” studies of its triumphal march since 1990. I have observed, for instance, two main types of adopters. The first I would call the enthusiast ones: early adopters, because they are interested in all technological novelties, or because it really improves their professional and social life, or as a status symbol to be exhibited. The second type, more prevalent in people belonging to my own professional environment (intellectuals and academicians), I may define the embarrassed ones. They would get themselves a mobile without confessing it to their friends, and without telling the number to anyone. If caught, they would pretend they only use it for calling, and never for being called; and only in case of emergency. In a short time, however, the number would be shared, and the use would spread to all circumstances.

There also was a period, in the first years of the mass adoption of mobiles, in which the experience of large numbers of individuals, each engaged in conversation with invisible partners – such as is usual in “non places” like airports, train stations, central city intersections , and some meetings – would give me chills. The fact that each of them was elsewhere with his mind gave me a queer sensation of separation between body and soul; the impression that what I was seeing were not whole humans but mere walking bodies, zombies or robots. I have mostly overcome this uneasiness, and have adapted to the new world in which the space of places and face-to-face interaction has been superseded by the non-space of electromagnetic wave-flows.

In these years, instead, a number of mild worries or reservations have dawned in my mind. They are based neither on systematic research nor on readings, but only on casual personal impressions. Thus, they do not feign any scientific status. I hope they will be, nevertheless, of some interest to you.

### *3.3 A question of good manners*

A first observation concerns the changes in the rules of “sociability”, of good manners, that the mobile has brought about. It was formerly considered rude, for instance, to intrude into an ongoing conversation between two parties; whereas it now happens all the time that the person you are talking with stops and turns his back to you to start another conversation with an absent, invisible caller. People would invite you to the restaurant and then spend much of the time talking with some invisible partners; or may be invited to a friend’s home and spend much of the time



talking with their faraway relatives. It must be reminded, however, that the breach is more than a century old, having started with the landline phone; the mobile has only made it general and ubiquitous.

One of the grounds of opposition, more than one century ago, to the installation of telephones in private homes was that it was unthinkable to allow strangers to enter uninvited into the domestic private sphere. In many Western cultures the principles of privacy and reserve were basic very important, and it was considered uncouth to expose to the public one's private affairs; whether the blame fell on him who did not keep for himself his affairs, or on him who spied on them. This principle has completely collapsed: people publicly discuss with their invisible partners all sort of private matters. Once upon a time, talking aloud and alone was seen as a manifestation of psychic derangement ("only mad people talk alone"); now it is accepted as normal. On public streets and places, discreet bystanders can avoid listening by distancing themselves; but the situation becomes particularly embarrassing on public transportation, when the person in front of you talks over the phone, sometimes on rather intimate matters, as you did not exist; which I personally take as a contemptuous, offensive attitude. Not to speak of those people who use train compartments as their offices, portables on their lap and phone on their ear, quite unconcerned of other occupants. The phone traffic in train coaches had become so intense and noisy, at least in Italy, as to force the train companies to impose some restraints on the use of mobiles on board. Before such measures, I was on the verge of abandoning the train altogether. Now things are somewhat better.

The phenomenological description of the breaches of traditional etiquette rules brought about by the mobile could go on a long while. Now, those rules are certainly culture-bound and relative, and they can change; it is possible that with time new sociability norms in this field will be generally accepted, or that new ways to reconcile the new technology with traditional norms will be found. In the meantime we are, I am afraid, in a period of anomy, which some may define as a period of bad manners.

### *3.4 The eclipse of thoughtful silence*

But there are more serious worries. One concerns the prevalence of (external) communication over (internal) thinking, and the eclipse of that traditional virtue, silence. Once upon a time, talkativeness was seen as a female trait, and especially of lower-class females; proverbially, of market-goers and kitchen-maids. But also ladies would chatter a lot, in their parlours (parlour from *parler*). Gentlemen would be reserved and restrain their words. In all traditional cultures there are, I think, many adages in this vein; an Italian one says "words are silver, but silence is gold". Leonardo da Vinci said "keep silent, so that you shall be deemed the only sage". There were formerly severe rules imposing silence in many social circumstances, and especially in the presence of higher-status persons. There were also important institutions founded on silence, like the hermitage and some monastic orders, like the cistercians. Silence is a golden rule also in many Oriental cultures. The idea was that silence with fellow-men favours communication with oneself and with God (*in interiore homine habitat Deus*, wrote St. Augustine: "in the interior of man God dwells"). The eclipse of silence thus also signals the eclipse of God (and perhaps of the traditional idea of man) in modern society. But it may also be taken as a symptom of another acknowledged very general trend, the feminization of society. Nowadays, the virtue of soft-spokenness (taciturnity) still seems to linger only to some categories of action-movie macho characters, like military heroes, cow-boys and policemen (Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger may be named here).

In most social circumstances, the ability to communicate has become the top virtue. This has to do, I believe, with the commercialization of society. Talkativeness (or eloquence) is the traditional character of vendors of all sorts (lawyers and politicians included, who have to sell their ideas). Not by chance Hermes (Mercury), the messenger god, was at the same time the protector of

orators and of merchants ( as well as of liars and thieves). Nowadays, the great majority of people are employed in the service sector, and most services have to do with selling something. So there are some very structural causes of the high value and wide diffusion communication has achieved in our society (and is reflected in the huge amount of all sorts of courses in communication offered by universities).

But there are also more direct and particular sources of present universal loquaciousness: phone companies have become giant chatter-industries, and one of the most profitable ones. They are exerting a tremendous media pressure on people to make they talk on the phone as often and as long as possible.

Now, speech and communications certainly are very good things. They respond to fundamental needs, both human-psychological and societal-structural. But every need and value must be balanced by the reciprocal (or opposing) one. Virtue stays in the middle. There is a time for speaking and communicating; but there should also be a time for thinking, for meditation, for contemplation, for concentration, for reflection, for introspection, for internal talk within oneself and, perhaps, with the inhabitants of the self. The worry is that the overemphasis on communication as the paramount human activity, and the ubiquitous availability of all sorts of ICT, is going to reduce the time and the need for those other activities. Observing the behaviour of students and train passengers, it seems to me that the mobile is invading most of what was called “free” time. No time is left for just idle thinking and observation. In their free time, up until a couple of decades ago, people would just read something; in train or parks, they would try some conversation with strangers. In the last twenty years, they would put on their earphones and fill the void in their heads with music. In the last ten years, they just dial someone up and talk, or send SMSs. They only seem to be able to exist as nodes and terminals of communication networks. Does anyone remember the scenario built in *Terminal man* (Crichton, 1972)?

### 3.5. *The weakening of self-reliance*

A further worry concerns the destiny of such traditional virtues as self-reliance and ingenuity. Once upon a time, the main aim of education was to equip young people to confront the contingencies of life as free-standing, autonomous, self-directed individuals. Problems should have to be met relying on inner resources of character, knowledge and skill. For many reasons, in late modern society the emphasis shifted to teamwork, coordination with others, ability to find and mobilize external resources, and, of course, communication. David Riesman denounced more than half a century ago the trend toward other-directedness. Earlier emphasis on inner resources and self-reliance prompted individual inventiveness, creativity, ingenuity, personal commitment. I am afraid that the universal availability of the mobile phone is encouraging an over-reliance on external help. Confronted with any difficulty, the automatic reflex is to dial someone up. This started already with the landline phone, of course. Secretaries spend a good deal of their time on the phone, asking their colleagues how do they do this and that, instead of trying to find out by themselves the right way to do it. But the trend is mightily reinforced by the efficiency and friendliness of the mobile. Of course, having a mobile gives a wonderful sense of security; and in many circumstances, it can be of vital importance, as, for instance, when one tries to find one’s way in the metropolitan jungle, or when one gets lost while trekking in the wilderness or gets into trouble while climbing mountains. But the inclination is, unavoidably, to ask for help in all circumstances, however trivial. Reaching to the phone has become a more automatic gesture than switching one’s own brain on. A cousin of mine, after fumbling for about half a second in her bag, cried “God, I’ve lost my keys” and immediately pressed the button on her mobile to summon her husband, nine hundred kilometres away, to ask him whether he’d seen them. Of course, the keys in fact were in her bag; she would have found them if only she had searched another half a second. But asking her husband had become an easier gesture.

An Italian poet, Giacomo Leopardi, once asked to himself, “Why are the birds the happiest creatures of all? Because they have small brains and good wings. Being so stupid, they do not know much pain or fear. And why do they have such small brains? Because they have good wings. Faced with any problem, instead of trying to solve it, they just fly away.” Is the mobile becoming the wings that free us from terrestrial ties and let us fly at will in the etherial waves?

Once upon a time the aim of education was to turn dependent infants into autonomous adults. Is the mobile reinforcing the trend - already fuelled by many other societal processes – to keep people in never ending dependence, perpetual infancy, as Tocqueville feared 170 years ago?

This also raises the analogy between chemical dependence on drugs and informational dependence on ICT. Given the human biological need for information and communication, are not the ICT industries turning this need into an addiction? I believe that some analogies have already been detected, regarding both some pathological forms of the habit on the consumption side and some selling practices on the side of the suppliers.

The fact that young are among the most enthusiast and avid users of mobiles also points to some correlations with immaturity, group-dependence, drug-use, consumption of music and of ITC, and other traits typical of youth subculture.

### *3.6. The liquefaction of decision making*

Watching all the people engaged in apparently solitary conversation, in the streets, cars, public and private places, it is hard to believe that social life was even possible before the mobile phone. What is all this talking about? Certainly, part of it is just a new way to fill already existing pockets of empty time; a pastime, an idle play, replacing earlier modes, such as reading, watching, playing cards (or gameboys), or talking to standbys. Part of it fulfils a need which was not possible to satisfy before, such as nurturing important social relations also while moving. These could be defined as expressive uses of the mobile. But there are also more instrumental uses, such as keeping track, also during transfers, of the state and position of significant others. But a fair amount of mobile talk (I do not have the data) simply is a new addition to the panoply of communications fed into decision making processes. What was previously done only from fixed ICT now can be done also while the parties are on the move. Communication has conquered a new large province of time.

What are the effects of the mobile phone on decision making processes? One, I fear, is simply the cluttering of information flows, i. e. information inflation (excuse me for the cacophony). As long as the technology was restricted to few people, they enjoyed a privilege, since they could receive and deliver information better than the others. When everybody has it, competing flows tend to write each other off. With communication it is as in stadiums: as long as most people stay sitting, those who stand up enjoy a better view. When everybody stands up, they all see just as they did before. I have the feeling that much of the “instrumental”, business talk over the mobile phone is just a remedy, a response, a reaction of calls from the competition, and thus has an inflationary nature.

Secondly, it may be safely stated that the effects of ICT and the mobile phone in particular to decision making processes are multifarious and probably contradictory. There is no doubt that it contributes to their democratization, because more and more people have access to the requisite information, and may be involved in the process. Moreover, secrecy – one of the traditional strongholds of undemocratic authority - is much more difficult, almost impossible, in ICT-rich systems. This however seems to have two different outcomes. Under some circumstances - such as in the case of clear goals and strong feelings – it may lead to very rapid collective decisions. Let us recall the crucial role gained in particular by internet and the mobile phone in recent political phenomena, like the “flash” movements and demonstrations occurring at the global level (the peace global rally of March 2003 against the war in Irak) or at the national one ( the rally in Spain of March 13, 2004, against the Aznar government’s stance on the Atocha slaughter). But such “flash

gatherings” of any scope, organized through internet and the mobile, have become common in youth subculture (e.g. the “rave parties”).

At the individual level, the availability of easy communication may make commitments less stringent. In the pre-telephone age, appointments and commitments had to be steadfast. Once you promised ( in face-to-face communication or by letter) you would do something, or be somewhere, at a certain time, you were bound to do it, because it would be often impossible to inform the party of any arisen obstacles. If you did not dot as agreed, you would lose your face and be labelled as an unreliable person. In the mobile phone age, you can at any time contact your partner anywhere and inform him, with a clear conscience, of the impediments or of your changes of mind. You can keep open your options up to the last minute. You can keep your freedom, which is the opposite of commitment.

At the collective level, the widening of the subjects involved may render decision making processes more complex, fuzzy and slow; and dilute responsibility. The more people you consult on what decision you should make, the more you have to delay decision and share the merit or blame of the outcome with all participants to the process. Or, the initiator of a decision-making process must engage in long negotiations with many parties, in order to build consensus. What I have in mind are, for instance, the endless negotiations in political meetings, where everybody is constantly switching between face-to-face conversation with present colleagues and mobile phone consultations with absent (or just a few yards away) ones. Often, they do not switch but talk at the same time with a multiplicity of present and invisible colleagues, even using more than one mobile phone at the same time. The same situation can be seen in some business meetings. Whether all this contributes to the clarity and efficiency of the political and the economic decision processes, I am not sure. I just happen to observe, tongue in cheek, that since the spread of the mobile phone, many bemoan a lack of political leadership, and that some advanced economies have entered a cycle of recession.

In cases when ideas, opinions, feelings , interests and positions involved are not very structured, the process may be even more fuzzy. One example are the endless mobile phone discussions among teenager groups (mostly concerning dating and mating activities, in the broadest sense). In pre-mobile times, teenagers used to have fixed hangouts (schools, gyms, street corners, bars, parks) where they would meet and discuss what to do, away from their parents’ earshot. Now such discussions can be done anytime from anyplace This is, I believe, the reason why teenagers are constantly talking over the mobile. Since typically teenage groups are very equalitarian (peer groups), everybody wants to know what everybody else thinks; the decision of every participant is conditional on the decision of others, and every individual decision can be reverted at the flick of a button (“listen, I have talked to Y, and if X is not coming we won’t come either” and that sort of thing). All this makes the whole process not only time consuming, but also precarious and wobbly. I believe that the case of the teenager group may be emblematic for the whole of post-modern society, which Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has characterized as “liquid”, and Beat Wyss (1997) has likened to the comfort, shapelessness and stretchability of a T-shirt.

### *3.7. Communication and control*

Communication and control are the two sides of the same coin, as Norbert Wiener made clear almost sixty years ago in the subtitle of his fundamental book on cybernetics. Every advance in the ICT is an advance in the potential of control. Control is one of the many synonyms of power, and is also the reciprocal of dependence, which we have discussed above. Dependents are controlled by those they depend upon. But control also takes the benevolent form of assistance. All this applies to the phone, mobile or otherwise. Adults would force the mobile on their elderly parents living alone in order to be able to check, anytime and anywhere, their health or other needs. Even more clearly, the gift of the mobile phone to teenagers and even children is usually an attempt of the parents to control their whereabouts, and be able to assist them, in case of need. Firms usually

equip their employees with mobiles both to let them work more efficiently and in order to be able to reach them all working the time, and hence to control them. On the other side, the *refuseniks* often see the mobile phone as a leash, one more device to chain people to the System.

Then there are the worries about privacy and freedom. The suspicion that all technological communications may be controlled by some dark powers is as old as the telephone, and with good reasons. Many political regimes did put such technologies under their control; Robert Orwell based his 1984 novel on this idea. A few years ago the “Echelon” scandal erupted, and the myth arose that all information flows crisscrossing the global infosphere – be it telephone or radio, fax or internet, and even all computer activities all over the globe - would be surveyed, recorded, and stored in the “three hectares of mainframe supercomputers” buried somewhere in the US midwest. Alas, 9/11 revealed that such global surveillance system either does not exist or is not (yet?) very efficient. However, that all telephone traffic is automatically recorded and stored, at least in some countries, seems clear. In Italy, so many wrongdoers get caught thanks to the analysis of telephone traffic, that I wonder why they keep using the phone at all. Officially, police eavesdropping needs to be authorized by judicial authorities; but it is hard not to think that it is practiced much more than admitted.

Progress in mobile phone technology is promising wonders. Some companies are touting mobiles so versatile and powerful as to allow a person to do just *anything* through the phone; to solve any problem that may arise in all realms of everyday life: business, family, social, recreational etc. A few years ago, at a conference on such perspectives in Milan, a promo was shown of a family living happily this way, managing all the circumstances of life by a flick of the thumb on the mobile. So I asked, “What if the phone drops and gets crushed by a steamroller?” “Oh, no problem” said the company man. “You just would walk over to the nearest mobile phone shop, report the loss and your name and in a matter of minutes you shall get another phone, *reloaded with all the data, files etc. of the lost one. Because we would have recorded and stored all your traffic in our mainframes, and can make a copy of it anytime*”.

I distinctively felt a wave of chill hitting the audience. Personally, I haven’t so far done anything I need to hide; but I assume that most people have some objections to a system where all their communicative activities are recorded and stored, somewhere, by someone.

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